



GLASS HOUSES

CIARÁN LLACHLAN LEAVITT

Make the film. Collect the paycheck. Get out of Dodge. Simple.

Nothing is ever as simple as it seems....

When director Roan Pirsig dies of an overdose, his nemesis and his protégé must come together to finish a film. One, Jae Cavanaugh is a workaholic, making the leap from independent film to Tinseltown's bright lights; her career hangs in the balance. Can she trust Reed Lewis? She doesn't have a choice.

The other, moody actress Reed Lewis, has more than a career to consider. She walked away from Hollywood once, does she want her career back? She doesn't have a choice. She does have a secret.

Can these very different women forge a friendship strong enough to withstand the storm brewing around the film? Do they even have a choice?

Glass Houses

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by
Ciarán Llachlan Leavitt

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This book is dedicated to the memory of two very special people:

Emma May Leavitt
August 26, 1915-August 20, 1988
and
Inge (Mueller) Leavitt
April 19, 1940-May 2, 1972

For my parents, Alan and Brenda, who supported me in ways I have only begun to understand, and for the woman who loved me enough to give me up.

For Mr. James Malloy, my English teacher, who believed I could write, and for Mr. Glen Hill, my math teacher, who agreed with him.

For Lunacy, who seeded the idea, for the pups on the Merwolf-Pack, who gave it a place to grow and for the Monsters swimming in The Pond, who winnowed it.

For Melissa Good, who actually wrote the novel 'Tropical Storm' used herein and fictionally ascribed to 'Holly Wulfenden', and who graciously allowed me free run of the material.

For Chris Boese, who banged an unwieldy manuscript into shape, for Mary, who found all my lost commas and for the rest of you, too numerous to mention, and who I hope know who you are, that edited, read, critiqued and encouraged the mayhem within these pages.

And most especially, for Xenonbia. I love you.

Ciarán Llachlan Leavitt
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Canada
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ONE

"Do you even have the slightest clue what time it is?"

"Three-thirty. Why?"

"Three-thirty a.m., and that was a rhetorical question. You don't actually care what time it is." Cait stifled her irritation. If Jae still had to ask what the problem was with calling at 3:30 in the morning, there was no way to explain it to her.

Jae continued as though Cait hadn't spoken. "I want to pitch Chambers."

This was promising. Not that she didn't plan to make Jae work for it. After all, waking someone up from a pleasant sleep in a comfy bed with a very cuddly fiancé just begged for a little retribution. "And?"

"And I need budget projections."

Cait sighed, activating her Palm Pilot. Sometimes playing with the terminally focused was pointless. "Based on?" Right from the word "pitch," she'd figured that this was where Jae was headed. The first, last and best argument to use with a production company was money. If Jae were going to pitch Chambers to be allowed to replace Roan Pirsig as director and take over the project, the dollars would need to make sense.

"Based on scrapping the script and everything Roan's shot so far. And still coming in on time and under budget." There was a minute pause. "I need it by seven a.m."

"Jesus, Jae. Everything?"

Jae laughed. "Look on the bright-side. You just got promoted."

Carefully, Cait eased herself out of bed so as to not wake Thom. "To what?"

"Assistant Director," Jae said, sotto voce.

"I'm already your AD." She pulled the cupboard door open quickly to avoid the popping noise of the latch.

"Picky, picky." There was a rustle of paper, then Jae continued. "I'll fax over an outline. We need to make it fit inside the remaining shooting days."

Cait poured the first of many cups of coffee, adding cream and sugar for good measure. "There's no way in hell you're getting that by seven."

Jae ignored her complaint. "Use the budget projections from *Sound of Autumn*."

"I can't use the projections from *Autumn*. It was a silent picture,

remember? And Jae, I'm not kidding. There is no way that I am doing budget projections and revising your shooting schedule by seven a.m."

"One."

"O'clock?"

"P.M. Today," Jae confirmed, either continuing to ignore—or completely missing—the mix of incredulity and sarcasm. Cait wasn't sure she wanted to know which was the case. "Cull it from the last draft. If everything that you know I'd film out of that one will fit into the time frame, then we'll have no trouble with a new script."

Cait couldn't help it. "New script?" More coffee.

"New script. I have to go. I have a date with a book and some software." Jae hung up.

She'd listened to the dial tone for several seconds before everything caught up with her. Jae was going to write the new script herself. On a computer. Shaking her head in bemusement, Cait put the handset down and pondered her next move, then opened a spreadsheet and looked at the columns of figures before setting the director's salary to zero. It wasn't like they were going to have to pay Roan. A careful look at the figures in another file gave her an idea: if she pulled the audio production costs from *Dark Comes the Morning* and combined them with the rest of the pre and post production costs from *Sound of Autumn*, then the budget projection should be fairly straightforward.

But rearranging the shooting schedule would mean rearranging bookings and quite possibly changing a venue that might not be available if they waited too long. You didn't just commandeer an amusement park at a moment's notice, for instance.

Several cups of coffee, 356 kb of notes and three hours later, Cait leaned back wearily for a moment then got up from the couch and walked over to the crowded bookcase that selfishly lined the one windowless wall of the living room. It took a few minutes to find what she was seeking amid the others. Only the white letters of the author's name, *WULFENDEN*, allowed her to separate *Tropical Storm* from the rest. Not a perfect title, but a damn sight better than the semi-sensationalistic *Balance of Power* that was the current working name for the film.

The thick paperback made the trip with her into the kitchen, where she refilled the coffee press with more freshly ground beans and lit the burner under the kettle, beginning to read sections while she waited for the water to come to a boil.

Given the chance, Jae could make this into a killer movie all right. It

was the kind of film that suited Jae—very heavy on character and visuals. It helped that the raw material needed to balance the garish Hollywood script was contained in the book, and she wouldn't put it past her boss to make the principals read it. *Tropical Storm* really was a good story—it had just been made into a bad script. Pensively, she regarded the cast list, musing that she wouldn't be at all surprised to see a couple of last minute casting changes as a result of what Jae would do with the script.

Maybe they'd get lucky and Reed Lewis would be the first to go.

* * *

Jae stared at the screen, trying to decide how serious a fatal exception error really was. *Pretty serious*. Even after restarting the machine, she couldn't find the document. Frustrated she shut the computer down, then carefully navigated the loft stairs, opting to continue working in the bedroom—the bed being more comfy than the austere linen clad couch in the living room. A pile of working notes littered the left side of the bed, and she scooped them up before adding them to the pile already conquering her desk.

Absently she stirred cream into cold coffee. A row of videos lining one cabinet caught her eye—Campion, Rozema, Spielberg, Wertmuller, Scott, Nair. One title stood out, its plain white plastic case more noticeable in the mix of lamp and moonlight. *Beyond the Setting Sun*. A small budget film with a forgettable plot and equally forgettable locales. Yet somehow she and Roan had dug the most out of both the script and cast to create a memorable film that had allowed her to make the leap to directing on her own.

Unbidden, images of Roan filtered through the silence. She had been looking forward to working with him again. Not everyone found him easy to work with, but he'd been a good mentor, teaching her a lot before she moved out from under his wing and began directing independent films on her own. From him, Jae had learned that dedication and reliability were two essential keys to success in this business—well, that and a degree in Early Childhood Education. It was completely unlike Roan to leave a set for no reason, and now he was gone. Tears warred with fatigue as she fought to remain in control, the finality of his death hitting again.

Out of habit, Jae looked over at the phone. The red light on her answering machine blinked eight times and she looked at her watch.

Four a.m. That meant a call from her mother about dinner tomorrow—correction—tonight; one from Antonia, who called like clockwork at eight o'clock, most likely checking to see if she was needed tomorrow; and one from Becky, reminding her not to be late for dinner; at least two hang-ups or wrong numbers; leaving two unaccounted for. Probably it had been Chambers or someone else from studio. *Not worth it.* Jae touched the rewind button, resetting the machine, deleting the messages unheard.

This was getting her nowhere. Wallowing in melancholy wasn't going to do Roan any good, and it certainly wasn't going to help her finish a script outline or secure the support she needed to take over the film.

Undaunted Jae opened a notebook, determined to bring the same enthusiasm to filming this movie as she had to that first one. If played right, there were a few things working in her favour. *Tropical Storm*, as it stood, didn't have a complete script, and there was no way it should have even cleared pre-production, let alone started filming. It was a promising story with good characters, but by no means the type of picture that Chambers' production company or its backers would stick with if there were even a chance they would lose money on it. Even if she hadn't done a lot of studio driven work, she did have a solid reputation as an independent, and not a single film that she'd helmed had lost money.

For the first time in several hours a smile lit her face, and she felt ready to meet the challenge.

Her eyes fell on a rented tape, and she fingered it thoughtfully. Keeping the cast intact would be another key issue, and Reed Lewis was the most key of them all. Jae slid the tape into the video machine. "Time to meet the Amazon Ice Queen."

* * *

Watching Reed Lewis across a crowded backlot or on the small screen of an editing bay monitor hadn't even come close to preparing Jae for the reality standing in front of her.

The camera often created the illusion of presence or height, but taking in the tall woman framed by the heavy timber door, she knew it wasn't an illusion. Reed Lewis had presence.

Intense blue eyes focused on her, and a low tenor cut the silence. "And you are...?"

"Jae Cavanaugh." She extended a hand.

Hesitation flickered briefly on the actress' face before a manicured hand reached out and encased hers briefly in a warm, firm grip.

The other woman remained blocking the doorway and made no move to invite her in, so Jae tried again. "I'm from RenFaire Productions," she faltered, hoping that the actress would at least recognize the name of the company that was filming the picture.

Surprise showed clearly on the chiseled features, and an elegant eyebrow curved over Reed's left eye. "Ah. Roan's lackey."

It didn't take a rocket scientist to read the dismissal in her tone. *Oh boy.* "Actually, Ms. Lewis, I was the second unit director." A piece of information that appeared to be met with impassivity that was, in its own way, worse than being dismissed.

Jae swallowed the slight and made one more try. "With Roan's passing, the future of the picture is in question." It sounded a tad melodramatic even to her own ears, but wasn't far from the truth, and for some, like Cait, who were counting on the income for things like weddings, it wasn't nearly melodramatic enough.

"So the lapdog has teeth. You want to be the new director?" Reed asked, demonstrating perceptiveness to go along with the hostility.

"Yes," Jae answered honestly, ignoring the insult and mildly surprised that the other woman knew anything about her at all.

For the first time, it seemed as though she had the actress' undivided attention. Reed Lewis stepped back and waved her imperiously into the room. Jae took a seat in the empty overstuffed chair closest to the window. Feeling warmth where the rays from the rising sun touched her skin, she focused on the sensation, allowing the energy to bolster her.

"They'd be better off scrapping the movie, not hiring a new director."

"Why is that?" Jae leaned forward slightly to keep the sun out of her eyes, glad of the natural opening.

"You have, I assume, at least read the screenplay?"

"A job requirement," Jae smiled, not letting herself be baited.

"Pirsig changed it a dozen times already."

Jae blinked. If that were the actress' biggest problem with the project, keeping her might be easier than she had thought. "That's what yesterday's argument was about?"

"Hardly. Pirsig's not the first director to shoot a fucked up screenplay." A soft snort accompanied the lilting words.

"Then what?"

"That would be between me and the dead man." No hint of remorse accompanied the cold words. "Why are you here?"

Maybe she was getting used to Reed Lewis' abruptness, but this time it didn't catch her so off guard, her bluntness oddly refreshing in a town known for its smarmy suck-ups. Or maybe it was just lack of sleep. "I pitch this afternoon, and I wanted to find out if you would be in or out."

"You could have done that over the phone."

Reed was watching her intently. "I could have. But I wanted to meet you. In person." After reviewing Reed's powerful performance in the role of Diana in *Equilibrium*, she'd known that—of all the cast members they had to work with—Reed was the linchpin. It had been a demanding role, one that, with a lesser actress playing the part, would have remained as one-dimensional on film as it had seemed in paperback.

"Well you've met me."

It was also becoming apparent why she was called the Ice Queen. The Amazon part had been a dead giveaway the second she'd laid eyes on the nearly six foot tall actress.

The cold blue eyes alone were enough; add the demeanour and Jae could only imagine what she would be like to deal with under conditions less to the actress' liking.

This was not going at all the way she'd envisioned it, and it occurred to her that showing up unannounced at a complete stranger's doorway at 5:30 in the morning, might not have been such a bright idea after all. "It would be nice if you'd meet me half-way."

To her surprise the actress laughed—a low pleasant chuckle that spread to her eyes, warming them. "I let you in, didn't I?"

"Point." Jae smiled slightly and leaned back in her chair. When the other woman didn't follow up her remark, she took the opportunity to more closely study the actress. Reed was clad in the casual attire common to film sets. There was, after all, no real point to dressing up only to have make-up and costuming repeat the process in a completely new way an hour later.

The silence that stretched between them was no longer edgy, an unspoken truce of sorts having been reached, so she allowed her eyes to move beyond the clothing to study the woman beneath them and was again struck by the sheer presence Reed radiated, even in seeming repose. A tiny jump of the vessel at the carotid artery was the only sign that revealed that the actress was not nearly as calm as she was projecting.

Jae could feel the first tendrils of excitement and anticipation catch fire in her guts as she watched Reed move, mentally comparing her to the characterization she had pulled from the script. Combined with the

performance she had watched last night, Reed's aura made it obvious why Roan had cast her against type for the role. The trick would be to make it work.

Nothing ventured. "When I pitch Chambers, I'd like to be able to say I have your commitment to stay." No sense in mentioning that she planned on scrapping everything they'd already shot and if she had to, she'd recast. She'd rather not. Reed was not only perfect for the part, but she came cheap.

Silence prevailed for a minute while the other woman took her measure. Jae could feel the weight of the evaluative stare and imagined the wheel's ticking over in the actress' mind. There was something else there too, but Jae couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Finally Reed spoke. "One condition. I agreed to play a lesbian, not to do full body nude sex scenes."

Jae mulled over her response, thinking about how to phrase her answer. Judging from Reed's tone, outing herself was probably not the way to go. Keeping it purely professional, she responded, "I'm not known for directing pornography."

It was clear that the actress had expected a less congenial response.

"Cavanaugh ... Cavanaugh ... you directed the silent picture that took Sundance by storm last year didn't you?"

"Sound of Autumn, yes."

"Gutsy. I can work for someone who'd film a silent picture in the twenty-first century." Grudging respect had replaced the antagonism that had marked most of the actress' words to that point.

Jae nodded. "Thank you." All she had so far was Reed's commitment, and already possibilities were writing themselves across her mind. Ideas and angles setting the stage and painting the mental pictures that she would translate to film. Aware that the silence had gone on perhaps a tad too long, she rose and extended a hand.

Jae was feeling optimistic about having accomplished her goal. Certainly she felt easier about the casting. Reed hadn't indicated that there was an ongoing issue between them—the actress' issues seemed to be with Roan. "Thank you for seeing me."

She followed Reed to the door; content with the affirmative nod she'd received. There was a soft click and an even softer snick as a bolt slid into place. Jae made her way to the car before she sagged against the vehicle, some of the tension from the meeting draining from her body as she relaxed a little, taking slow steady breaths. One down, one to go.

Leaning against the inside of the door, Reed let out the tension-

induced breath she'd figuratively been holding since she'd first opened the door. Aware that Cavanaugh was still in the driveway, it gave her a small measure of satisfaction to discover that the would-be director was not as calm as she pretended. She wondered briefly if the objective of Cavanaugh's visit had been met—if she'd passed muster.

Sea-green eyes had roved over her assessingly, and Reed shifted slightly at the memory of the intense gaze of the director. The motives of any other director who studied her that closely hadn't been hard to guess, but Cavanaugh confused her. Male directors—no problem, but she'd never worked with a woman director before and all bets were off.

Since she had been scrutinized so closely, she had availed herself of the same opportunity. Her first impression was that Jae Cavanaugh probably wasn't quite as young as she looked—but not by much. The short blonde hair that fell around her face gave her an almost waifish look, and Reed briefly considered how much steel might be hidden under the surface softness.

The sound of the car engine faded and Reed moved away from the door. It was too early to get a start on the day and too late to go back to bed. Her eyes fell on the script. A new director meant a new interpretation of the material, so she picked it up from the table and sprawled on the couch.

Several hours later, satisfied that, as long as no one changed them she knew her lines cold for the next scheduled rehearsals, she put the script down. It would, she reflected, be interesting to see the spin Cavanaugh would put on things. One thing was for certain: she would rather work for Cavanaugh than Pirsig. Hell, she'd rather work for Cavanaugh than be unemployed. She couldn't afford unemployment.

The telephone rang and she waited until the second ring to pick it up, her stomach tensing involuntarily. "Hello." She relaxed, recognizing the caller, and listened to the bubbly rental agent launch into a standard greeting and satisfaction questionnaire.

Miss Bubbly hadn't realized it at the time, but as long as it had at least four walls, a roof and was quiet, Reed was going to take it. Her main concern was privacy. Los Angeles wasn't a city to be in if you craved solitude, but she was determined to find some place quiet enough to keep her nerves from fraying.

Walking back into the maelstrom that was filmmaking Hollywood style was hard enough without having to subject herself to the media circus and sideshow that came with it. Reed was going to stay as far away from the media as she could get.

Make the film, collect the paycheck, get out of Dodge. Simple.

TWO

"You can't wear that!" Cait exclaimed.

Jae looked up from her budget notes and film treatment to find Cait looming over the desk, hands on hips. "Why not?" She'd ironed. Mostly. And what exactly was the point of wrinkle free cotton pants and classic linen shirts if they weren't multi-purpose?

"Because they don't want rumpled, artistic Jae Cavanaugh. They want savvy, business woman-cum-director J.A.E. Cavanaugh."

"Oh." The lump that had been growing steadily in the pit of her stomach solidified, and for a second Jae thought she might actually vomit. It was too late to change her mind now. Quickly she ran her fingers through her hair one last time then gathered her notes.

"Here." Cait held up a make-up brush.

"Right, so now you want me to go in drag?" Jae winced.

"Oh shut up. And hold still, Goddammit." A startling variety of powders were swiftly and expertly applied. "You're welcome."

"Thank you."

Cheeks swiped, eyes lined and lips highlighted, Jae stepped out of her office and headed for the potential lions' den. Chambers' office was guarded by a young man in his early twenties, who looked up from the pile of mail he was opening, seemingly glad of the interruption. She caught sight of what appeared to be a script or story submission—a thick stack of purple sheets of paper—and rolled her eyes in commiseration. She'd gotten her share of unsolicited manuscripts.

"Yeah. Definitely one for the 'Thanks, but no' pile." The sheaf of paper was set aside, exchanged for an appointment book.

"Cavanaugh," Jae supplied helpfully.

"Go on in, they're expecting you." The admin picked up another manila envelope and slit the top, attention back on the large pile of mail.

"Thanks." Jae checked her portfolio one last time making sure that she hadn't forgotten anything. She hadn't.

A deep breath and she was in.

"Ms. Cavanaugh." Rod Chambers, President of RenFaire Productions, and more importantly, the executive producer of *Tropical Storm / Balance of Power*, was the first to greet her.

"Gentlemen." Jae nodded to them all in turn, absently casting their roles for a film version of the meeting. Maybe it would help if she

pretended they were just a really intelligent version of the Three Stooges.

“Have a seat.” Chambers gestured to an empty chair. “I’ll be honest. I’ve already spoken to the insurance company, and they are willing to pay out on the completion bond.”

Jae nodded. The ice had been broken, so to speak, and now she could just dive into the meat of why she had come. She passed out copies of the budget projections she had done, along with a summary sheet of the films she had produced and directed—with the net profits highlighted. “As you can see from the figures, I can complete the project within the originally scheduled time frame and still come in on budget.” Actually, she was sure that they would come in well under budget, but it was always smart to leave a little leeway where money was concerned. “Which means that instead of losing two and a half million dollars, you’ll be making a profit.” She’d already checked the terms of the completion bond; it only paid out seventy-five percent of the insured budget.

“No. There’s no completion insurance for box-office failure. That means if we allow you to direct, we risk losing the whole ten million,” a thin, bird-like man to her left challenged. He had reminded her of Alan Ruck in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, now he seemed more like Alan Rickman in one of his more malevolent roles.

Jae considered her reply carefully. They were shooting a picture already destined to fail. What little script there was couldn’t make up its mind about being a comedy, thriller, romance or social commentary. It wasn’t about not wanting to be seen criticizing Roan or anyone else—especially since she had no idea if one of the men in this room was the person who originally gave the green light to the project. It just wouldn’t be politic to point it out. Instead she opted for the direct approach. “I can deliver a film that won’t lose money.”

Chambers spoke again. “You can’t guarantee that.”

It always came back to money. There was no such thing as a ‘can’t miss’ property in Hollywood—no matter what the industry wags claimed—but there were ways to avoid stinking. All seven of her films had made money—even if none had been blockbusters. “Three of my films were critically acclaimed, and not one of them has ever lost money.”

“Not one of your films has had a budget over a million dollars either.” The last of the producers spoke, a man she recognized from a previous meeting as an accountant. “It’s an economy of scale. There really isn’t much risk overspending a couple of hundred dollars compared to a

couple of hundred thousand.”

“No offense, but when you don’t have *any* extra money, there is no difference between a hundred and a hundred thousand.” Jae met his gaze, her mental casting agent giving her fits. For some reason she wanted to cast Keanu Reeves.

As frustrating as the lack of a simple yes or no was, it was a good sign. The longer the conversation wore on, the more likely it was that she could convince them that finishing the film was the best course of action, and she was the best choice to do so. In fact, that they were having this conversation at all weighed heavily in her favour.

She waited, continuing to meet Chambers’ gaze, her relaxed posture a contrast to his folded arms, stiff shouldered one. *But then*, she thought, *I have nothing to lose*.

“You’re short a lead actress.” He leaned back slightly, more—she thought—to get a better look at how his companions were reacting than out of any genuine ease.

If he had expected to catch her flat-footed with the information, he was about six hours too late. She’d gone to see the actress who’d been cast as Kerry Stuart, right after she’d met with Reed Lewis, and been tersely informed that the contract had an out clause and it was being invoked. Cait had already made a series of calls and there were two contenders on deck, one of which had read for the part originally and still wanted it, more so if Jae was attached to it.

“I’ll worry about that,” Jae smiled, suggesting with her tone that if the actress hadn’t quit, she would have been replaced any way.

“I expect it on time and on budget.”

“Let me film it my way, and I guarantee it.” Streamlining the script and losing the excess filler the last scriptwriter added would virtually guarantee that it came in on time and under budget. Scrapping the car chase alone would save them a week and four hundred thousand dollars. *What is it with guys and car chases?*

“And if I say no?” It was all Chambers now; the other two men were merely set dressing.

Jae kept her tone level and professional. “Then we keep talking until we reach an agreement that works.”

For the first time since she’d known him, Rod Chambers smiled, shedding ten years in the process. Jae still wanted to cast Warren Beatty in his role, but he was looking a whole lot friendlier now than he had when she first came in.

“I want to see the altered shooting draft on my desk in,” he flipped

through his Daytimer for show, "... a week, and the first tape edits the week after that." Chambers looked up expectantly, putting the ball back in her court.

It was more than she'd hoped for, half expecting to find Chambers wanting to stand over her shoulder and watch every step. She nodded acceptance.

There'd be a couple of days of tedious legal back and forth, as his lawyers and hers hammered out the final contract, but from this moment on, she was the director. Now all she needed was a script, a lead actress and some sleep.

That order seemed right too.

* * *

"Jae Cavanaugh's office; Caitlynn Waters speaking." It had taken a couple of seconds but she'd finally located the phone receiver wedged under a cushion and further buried by a stack of papers on one of the mismatched office chairs. "I'm sorry—could you repeat that?" The caller's words had been lost under the thud of a box of paper hitting the throw rug topped hardwood floor.

The studio travel agent—responding to an earlier query about the scriptwriter's flight from Miami—detailed the itinerary, and Cait dutifully copied it down. A look at the cluttered surface of Jae's desk prompted her to slip the paper into her pocket where it would be safe. Next she'd phone for a car to pick the woman up at L.A.X. in the morning. It never hurt, Cait reasoned, to be prepared or make a good impression.

Not quite as prepared as Jae though. Her boss had been a very busy girl. Every available inch of wall in Jae's office was covered with rough story board drawings of scenes taken from a combination of the original script—dug out of a box in Roan's old office—and the novel itself.

It was the quality of the original script that had led Jae to hire the book's author to work with them in revising the dialogue in the film. Often authors made lousy scriptwriters—they were afraid to jettison their own material—but Holly Wulfenden appeared to be an exception. Her original adaptation of *Tropical Storm* was tight. Cait was optimistic that by the end of the week, Jae and Holly would have hammered out a workable script, and they could get moving on filming. Six weeks was not a lot of time to shoot a movie—especially one that involved location work.

Cait crossed the last item off her to do list and turned off her organizer.

“Ready?”

“Jesus, Jae!” Startled, Cait jumped. “Are you trying to kill me? ’Cause I don’t think you want to do that—at least not before I get your script entered into Filmmaker.”

Obviously in a good mood, Jae didn’t respond, instead she threw herself into her chair and scribbled some notes on a pad.

Turn about could be fair play. Amused, Cait watched Jae add another handwritten page to the stack in her inbox, while the dormant computer screen looked on helplessly. “Have you ever considered the total irony of your shooting a movie about two cyber geeks in love?”

Jae took the teaser and arched a brow. “Which part do you find ironic?” The partial grin split into a mock glare.

“Is Becky still talking to you?” Cait asked, feigning innocence. The hook was set, and in a minute she’d have her paycheck.

“Yes. Well, she was as of yesterday, anyway.”

Cait lifted her own brow sagely. “Then it’s the cyber geek part, though if you don’t start paying more attention to her...” She deliberately let the sentence trail off, having no wish to turn this into a lecture she’d already delivered a thousand times over the years. Besides, it was time for the pay-off. “In fact, aren’t you supposed to be at dinner with her and your parents?”

Jae’s face turned a very satisfying shade of white, her untidy mop of blonde hair seeming almost neon in contrast, and she bolted from the office.

Cait laughed, then scooped Jae’s car keys from where they dangled on the ear of the stone gargoyle perched on the one clear corner of the desk and walked to the office door. She arrived at the door in time to watch Jae running pell mell back down the corridor. Taking pity on her friend, she flipped the keys to Jae, who deftly caught them in one hand, simultaneously turning around to head back to the car.

“Have fun!” she added, unable to resist taunting Jae a little more. As far as mothers went, Elizabeth Cavanaugh was okay, but not someone Cait could envision as a fun dinner companion.

Just before she would have disappeared around the corner Jae stopped, a slow grin spreading over her face. “Hey, Cait, give Reed Lewis a call for me, ask her to come down to the studio Tuesday morning around eleven.” The slow grin became a flat out mocking smile. “Oh, and Cait?”

“Yeah?”

“Have fun.” Jae waved and turned the corner.

Ego deflated slightly, Cait went back into the office she shared with Jae, wondering what part of tracking down the recalcitrant Reed Lewis was supposed to constitute fun.

* * *

Reed stood facing the nightlife below, conscious of the humming traffic and quiet murmurs of the invisible insects surrounding her. She swirled the wine in her glass—the keys to the house and a bottle of red wine had been handed over cheerfully by the rental agent in exchange for a rent check—and studied the translucent liquid as it reflected the glow of the porch lights.

The rail creaked slightly as she leaned against it but held firm, allowing her to lean out and study the terraced lots below. The houses were stacked and arranged in such a way as to use maximum space while providing as much privacy as possible. She could, if she strained her hearing, make out snatches of conversations drifting up from the nearby dwellings.

It wasn't perfect, but it would do for the two months they were scheduled to be shooting in Los Angeles. She made her way back to the small kitchen and rinsed the glass before setting it to drain in the rack.

She paced through the sparsely furnished living room and flipped on the TV. Mary Hart's coifed blonde locks resolved onto the 28-inch screen, and a picture of Jae Cavanaugh caught her attention. Reed upped the volume in time to hear a coming-up-next announcement from the plastic man—whatever his name was—that had replaced John Tesh.

The leather sofa squeaked under her weight as she eased down onto its soft folds. The subtle scent of leather and saddle soap clung to the ancient piece.

Pictures of Jae and Roan appeared in the top corner of the screen, but it was the caption that froze her gaze to the screen. “Director Dead at 47.”

The rest of the clip mesmerized her, even though she already knew most of the details. Information and speculation were handed out and spun in the most lurid Hollywood fashion, her own name entering into the story more than once. It seemed their argument had become fuel for the fires of public speculation. Hart added that acclaimed independent film director and former student, Jae Cavanaugh, had replaced Roan

Pirsig on the set.

Pirsig was dead. It was the most perfect of outcomes. So why didn't his death make her happier?

Reed shifted to reach the remote and turned the channel, startled when the soft chirping of her cell phone cut in over the electric pulsing hyperactivity of a car ad. The call display read 'Heidi Chappelle'. Eager and trepidacious, she extended the antenna then hit talk.

"Is it true?" Heidi didn't say hello, just demanded information.

"Yes." There wasn't a whole lot more to say really.

"Good." The vehemence in her friend's voice was a counterpoint to her own calm indifference. It should have been the other way around.

"Why you agreed to work with that man again, I'll never understand."

"He was the only game in town."

Even if working for another director had been an option, there weren't many directors who would take a chance on casting an actress who had just walked off a set at the end of filming one day and never returned. Liz Kuiper had somehow accomplished it, though. The agent transmitted both the contract offer and the threat of Roan completely blackballing her if Reed didn't play the game his way, in the same phone call. So she'd left her son in the care of her best friends and trooped off to Hollywood, trusting Heidi and Geoff to keep him safe.

Heidi changed the subject, her voice softening in the process. "Rio misses you."

A lump formed in Reed's throat. She hated to leave Riordan behind, but she didn't have a choice. "How is he?" she whispered.

"Holding up. He slept a lot today, Maggie's boys were over yesterday, and I think it wore him out."

"Is he awake now?" Probably not, it was three hours later in Maine, but she had to ask.

"I could wake him," Heidi offered.

"No, let him sleep, he needs it. Tell him Mummy loves him and I'll talk to him tomorrow." Her eyes fell on the laptop balanced at the edge of the table and an idea popped in her head. Rio loved surprises.

"Will do. Take care of yourself, okay?" Heidi's worry was evident in the instructions.

She rang off and put the cell back on the counter. *Focus. I have to stay focused.* The laptop caught her eye again and Reed picked up the cell phone, activating it even as she switched on the computer. Connecting via the cell link, she navigated through several bookmarks before finding the one she wanted. She typed a quick message, then pasted the

link into the email.

Clicking send she watched the status bar indicate her message was on the way, then shut down. *One hamster dance coming up.*

She closed the cell phone and set it down for the second time in five minutes, only to have the house phone ring. Reed screened the call, listening to some assistant of Jae Cavanaugh's ask her to come into the studio Tuesday. The day after Roan's funeral. Maybe she'd be able to dance on his grave Monday.

Maybe.

Mutely she toasted the bare sliver of moon showing in the darkening sky then turned her attention to dinner.

Maybe.

* * *

The house was quiet. No music played on the stereo, and the thick panes of window glass shut out the noises of night. Moonlight fell in patches where parted curtains gave it entry, but there were no other lights to interfere with the shadows.

Outside, illuminated by the same moonlight, an opossum clung to the side of the large camphor tree that spread its leafy arms over the backyard. The last of the black fruit hung just out of reach of the small marsupial, her pouch distended by young nearly ready to enter the world.

Jae watched her climb, occasionally losing sight of the sleek gray body as the elongated leaves hid the animal from view. Food and shelter from the elements—daily tasks that left no room for confusion; and the only regret was in not having moved swiftly enough across a highway. At least that was the kind of regret that ended quickly and didn't have to be weighed, looking for absolution. The kind that didn't leave you sitting in the middle of the night staring outside, sorting through a pile of regret. Regret that she had been late. Regret that she'd even gone at all.

From the moment she'd arrived, it had gone badly. The waiter had looked down disapprovingly at her somewhat rumpled jacket and slacks, the activity level of her day there to be plainly read in every crease. La Boheme had been packed, the famed Italian restaurant a noisy collection of the who's who and the who wants to be, and holding a prime table on a Saturday night hadn't been appreciated.

She could close her eyes and watch the whole evening unfold, a

miniature movie she was powerless to affect. Jae could see herself smile at the waiter and follow him to the terrace table where her parents and Becky were waiting.

"There you are," her father's booming voice greeted her cheerfully.

"Hi, Daddy." She kissed him on one cheek then leaned down to hug her mother. "Hello, Mother. Sorry I'm late." Her father pulled out her chair, kissing the top of her head as he guided the chair back into place. Good sign. If her parents weren't upset, then Becky would have a harder time sniping at her for being late. She'd been wrong.

When she'd reached under the table and squeezed Becky's hand, there'd been no answering squeeze and no change in the icily polite expression on her girlfriend's face, despite what she'd thought was a suitably apologetic and endearing smile of her own. From there, the evening had steamrolled into disaster.

"Surely you weren't at work today?"

"Jae's always working, Elizabeth."

Becky had considered her returning to work for Roan to be selling out, trading her creativity for Hollywood exposure. Jae hadn't been able to convince her otherwise. Directing a commercial picture wasn't far up the scale, though she suspected Becky would feel differently if she'd been cast in one of the open roles. Jae ignored the gibe. Tonight was not a night for fighting.

Silence.

It was, of course, her mother who broke the silence. "I know he was an important influence for you."

"You'll do fine, Pumpkin," her father offered reassuringly.

Her cell chose that moment to chirp. "Excuse me." She answered the call and made her way to the quiet area near the washrooms.

It was Roan's executor.

A few numbing moments later, she terminated the call and leaned back against the wall. Becky was not going to be happy. Tears threatened to well up and spill from her eyes, and only the curious stares of the watching diners kept her from giving in to the impulse to cry. She took one calming breath, then another, until she felt enough in control to go back to the table and make her excuses to her parents and Becky. Jae absently tucked the phone back onto her belt, unable to remember actually hanging up. She caught the other woman's eye and waved Becky over.

Instead of approaching, Becky spun on her heel and left the restaurant. Jae stared after the tall brunette. Finally, the headlights of a

sleek coupe flashed on the glass doors of La Boheme, and she knew Becky wasn't simply making a point; she'd left.

Jae turned back toward the table and imagined she could hear the exasperated *Jacqueline* in her mother's eyes. She preferred the bemused sympathy in her father's, sort of a "been there, done that" commiseration.

Jae broke the expectant silence. "I need to go." She couldn't find the words to say why. It had been hard enough to tell them about Roan's death; the memorial service was impossible to contemplate, never mind discuss.

Her father nodded in understanding. "We'll be fine, Pumpkin."

A weak smile replaced the worried tension she had felt frozen on her lips. "Thanks, Daddy." She turned to her mother and saw she wasn't going to get off quite so lucky with her other parent.

"Is Becky okay?" Elizabeth Cavanaugh asked.

Not quite the question Jae had been expecting and definitely not the tone she'd expected to hear it in.

Tears began to spill down a cheek, and her mother wrapped her in a hug, oblivious to the people watching them surreptitiously. Nodding into her mother's chest Jae whispered, "I don't know." She still didn't want to make Roan's death real by speaking of it.

A gentle finger lifted her chin, "Call me tomorrow, okay? We'll talk. Just remember your father and I love you very much. Now go, before you're late."

Jae smiled. "Love you, too." She squeezed her mother's hand and pecked her cheek softly. "Thank you."

"Night, Pumpkin." Her father added a kiss before sitting back down and picking up a menu having, she guessed, reached his sensitive chat limit.

That hadn't been the end, though. When she'd arrived home the front door had been unlocked, and the only noise she could hear was from the TV in the front room. Hanging first her coat, then her bag on the hooks by the door, she slid her shoes off and walked to the living room. Becky was curled up on the lined couch reading the *Hollywood Reporter*. She seemed unaware of her girlfriend's arrival, so Jae stood and watched a moment.

Jae cleared her voice slightly, announcing her presence. Becky looked up and Jae could see that she had been crying recently and felt her stomach clench slightly. *This could get messy*. She said the only thing that came to mind. "Hi." It sounded inane—even to her.

“Hi.” Becky put the magazine down on the coffee table and drew her knees up to her chin, wrapping both arms around her legs.

Jae was suddenly weary; her legs seemed incapable of holding her up. She moved to a large chair opposite her lover and sat down, feeling the stress of the last two days slam home all at once—aware that it was only going to get worse in the next few minutes, not better.

Silence prevailed for several heartbeats, then Becky took the bull by the horns. “We’re done, aren’t we?” Hurt and confusion mixed with despair, making her sound lost.

Jae nodded. “Yes.” There, it was said. The unspoken made tangible by the forming of the words.

“Is directing this picture that important to you? That you would give up everything we had?”

Past tense. Had. Becky probably didn’t even realize that she was no longer talking about what they used to share, but rather what they’d lost along the way. “It’s already gone, Becky.” That it saddened her didn’t make it any less true.

“Is it someone else? No, forget I said that. It’s the damned job. Fine.” Anger had become the dominant emotion in the redhead’s voice and she had flung herself off the couch and was now towering over Jae. “A camera can’t make love to you, can’t hold you, but I wish you much joy of each other.”

She didn’t want to fight, didn’t have the energy to even defend herself from the verbal attack, so she chose not to make a reply, remaining silent.

Becky stepped away, “Now I understand why your average relationship lasts about six months. I got a year, lucky me.” She left the room and returned a couple of minutes later with a small suitcase and a cardboard box. “I’ll have your things sent over tomorrow.”

Jae didn’t know what but she felt she had to say something, “Becky ... I...”

“You what? You’re sorry? I don’t think you are. It doesn’t matter to you that I loved you. That always came second. I always came second. Now you’re free. Enjoy it.” She spun on one heel and exited the room, her footfalls fading in the hall, followed by the slam of the front door and the flaring to life of an automobile engine.

“Bye.” Jae spoke to a woman who was no longer there.

THREE

Jae swiveled around in her office chair, stretching to grab the phone. "Cavanaugh speaking."

"There's a delivery for you. Do you want it back there or up here?" the building's front desk receptionist asked.

"Send it back, Jennifer, thanks."

"No problem. It looks a little heavy to be carrying anyway."

Her stomach knotted immediately realizing what was being delivered. She took a deep breath then stood to meet the delivery person at the office door. It seemed like forever before she heard the slight squeak of the dolly wheels. Two cardboard boxes sealed in packing tape were stacked against the red metal frame. Sixteen cubic feet of relationship jetsam and flotsam.

"Sign here, please."

The pen felt weightless in her nerveless fingers. She scratched her name over the electronic pad with the stylus. "Just put them over there, please."

He dropped them next to the couch then left, and she shut the door behind him. Taking a pen knife from the desk she crossed the hardwood floor and sat down on the Aztec print throw rug in front of the couch, then carefully slit the packing tape.

Her hand rested on the lid, mind poised equally between a desire to open the boxes and find out if her CD's and books were in there, and a fear that the gifts of a birthday, a Christmas and two Valentine's days would also be inside.

Twenty-four hours. Change beyond belief. Things had gone wrong from the moment she'd walked into the restaurant. That would be one memory too many today. Instead, Jae reached for the first box.

The cardboard lid came off easily, revealing a row of neatly packed books and videotapes. Moving the top box aside, she slit the tape on the bottom one and pulled its lid off. A soft rap prevented her from looking at the contents, and she stood up. "Come in."

Reed Lewis poked her head around the door, long raven hair fanning out in the air and catching the light from the window behind the desk. The actress looked from her to the boxes and lifted an inquiring eyebrow. "Bad time?"

She shook her head. "Not really, just going through some stuff a friend returned." Her voice quavered on the last syllable and Reed

regarded her intently, so she managed a wan grin in return. "What can I do for you?" Jae seated herself on the couch and motioned for the actress to join her.

"It'll keep." Nevertheless Reed did take a seat on the end of the couch and stretched her long legs out in front of her, crossing them at the ankles. "Were you together long?"

The astute question surprised her. Not only was it the longest unprompted statement she'd gotten from Reed, but it was also the first time the actress had asked anything remotely personal about her in spite of the questions she'd asked. Jae thought about how to answer. She didn't want to lie to Reed, but she wasn't about to go someplace she'd regret either. "Just over a year." She leaned back into the cushions. "Sometimes I wonder why I bother."

She hadn't even been able to explain it to Becky. For what seemed like the thousandth time, she replayed Saturday night over in her brain again.

A dull gray rock in the top of one of the boxes caught the corner of her eye and Jae leaned down and picked it up before settling back onto the couch and continuing. "Do you believe in soul mates and stuff?" Jae didn't know what prompted her to ask the question, and she was prepared to hear the actress snicker.

"My grandmother used to tell a story about a race of mythological beings that were divided by the god Zeus. Once, a long, long time ago, all people had four legs and two heads. And then Zeus threw down thunderbolts and split everyone into two. Each half then had two legs and one head, but the separation left both sides with a desperate yearning to be reunited. Because they each shared the same soul. And ever since then, all people spend their lives searching for the other half of their soul."

"You don't sound like you believe it."

"She did."

The purplish crystals inside the geode danced in the light. "I think I do too," Jae said unconvincingly.

"Then you'll probably find it." The actress eased her lanky form off the couch. "Later."

"Thanks."

Reed gave her a warm smile in return and left.

Jae watched the other woman leave and then realized that the actress hadn't ever told her why she'd dropped by. A second later she realized that Reed had come by request—it was just after eleven a.m., Tuesday

morning.

* * *

Reed was leaning against a post in a mock-up of a hotel room, eyes closed, when she felt someone approach her.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself,” Reed replied, opening her eyes and looking up at the director.

“I’d like to talk to you about a couple of things, how about joining me for lunch?”

Reed hesitated as she thought about it a minute. She was not in the habit of socializing on the set, generally using her lunch breaks to recover from the stress of being on. *Why not?* Cavanaugh was no threat. “Sure, Ms. Cavanaugh.” She stood.

“Please call me Jae.”

“All right then, Jae, but you’re buying.” It was a feeble joke at best, but all she could come up with to mask her tension, a part of her suddenly wondering what she’d done wrong.

“Deal. The Chinese food will be here in a minute.”

Her startled confusion must have registered on her face because the other woman laughed. “You didn’t expect me to make you eat from the catering truck, did you?”

Reed smiled in spite of herself and followed the director across the sound stage.

Chinese food was, reflected Reed thirty minutes later, not the best choice of meals to be eating if you wanted to appear in control and elegant. She looked down at her chopsticks. *Well, at least not for me.* Jae, on the other hand, was expertly twirling her chow mein noodles around her utensils and getting the food to its destination without so much as a drip going astray.

They were sitting in the director’s office, and Reed found herself looking interestedly at the various objects piled on every available inch. It was a pretty amazing amount of clutter considering that Jae had only had the office for, what, a month? They’d been exchanging bits of small talk, and Jae had revealed a weakness for oriental dishes and spices, while she’d copped to a fondness for hot dogs. The other woman laughed easily and often, and Reed found herself relaxing and enjoying her lunch. Idly, she continued her survey of the room, spotting an intricately woven tapestry on the far wall.

“So we are doing a cattle call this afternoon.” Jae was speaking and the actress turned her attention from the wall hanging to the director. “I’d like you there.”

Reed was surprised. She was used to being told point-blank what to do, and while Jae’s request was in fact an order, it didn’t put her hackles up. “You want to do a scene?”

“Yes. It may be a moot point. Two of the actresses who originally read for the part have been contacted, so we may cast that way.”

“What part’s being recast?” The rumour mill already had it that Jess Miller had bailed, Roan’s departure being all the excuse she needed to get out of her contract to play Kerrison Stuart.

“Kerry Stuart,” Jae replied matter of factly, confirming the rumour. “We need to test you against the others and pick the combination with the most chemistry.”

Her stomach tensed involuntarily as Reed wondered what scenes they’d use to test for chemistry. The chopsticks hung loosely in her hand, so she carefully set them on the edge of the carton, as the comfort she’d been feeling just a few minutes earlier evaporated under the onslaught of uncertainty and fear. She remained quiet, waiting for Jae to speak again.

“But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Reed’s stomach clenched again and she forced herself to answer. “What?”

“I want you to read this.” Cavanaugh tossed her a thick novel.

“You want me to read a book?” She opened it and scanned a few lines, but Jae spoke before she could object.

“It’s the novel the script is based on.” She held another copy up for Reed to see. “I’ve got one, too. We can’t present it all on film and since the script hasn’t cleared rewrite yet, I was hoping it would give everyone an idea of where we are going.”

“You’re rewriting the script?”

“Not all of it, no.” The blonde smiled, running her fingers through her short hair. “Just the R-rated bits, the pseudo-political thriller add-ins, and the car chase.”

“And you’re telling me this—why?” Reed was confused.

Intense green eyes locked on her blue ones, and Reed had to fight the impulse to look away. “Because I need you behind me on this. I have to lay tape and hand over some film edits in ten days, and it all revolves around you. Every scene.”

This was not how it normally worked, and Reed felt a vague sense of

unease. The increased pace to get some tape down wasn't the problem; she just didn't know what to make of Jae.

The director was still studying her, and Reed did her best to remain still, unwilling to let her mental argument show. The director backed off and broke their eye contact, turning instead to retrieve a sheaf of papers from one cluttered corner of the desk.

"This is the scene I want to do this afternoon." Jae handed over a copy.

Reed nodded, glad for the decrease in intensity.

"Hey, you going to eat that?" Jae was pointing at a prawn balanced precariously over the edge of a carton.

The sudden change in atmosphere caught her by surprise. "No, go ahead." Where the slim blonde was going to put it was beyond Reed.

A cell phone chirped and they both reached for one, Jae holding hers up and saying, "It's me."

Reed took the opportunity to excuse herself and fled back to her trailer. She shut the white metal door behind her and took a deep breath. Part of her was excited about the approach she could sense Cavanaugh was going to take to the material, the other part warned her about getting emotionally invested in the picture.

She was impressed, Cavanaugh was playing to the strength of her existing cast while buying herself time to bring the production under control, and Reed found that she was looking forward to starting work. The cell in her pocket rang and she pulled it out, dropping onto the settee before answering it. "Hello," she clipped.

"Mum?"

"Rio." Her voice softened.

"Cool page, it had like 30 different animals, and that laugh! Did you send it last night when I was asleep? Mark and...." He was off, excited words tumbling out a mile a minute.

"Slow down a sec, kiddo. Now what about Mark?" She listened indulgently as he recounted his friend's visit, letting him tell the story in his own way, even if the chronology made it somewhat hard to follow.

"You going to play with me tonight?"

"Not tonight, Rio, tomorrow okay? I've got to shoot late tonight, but I promise to help you find the key to the next level tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart." She drew her fingers across her chest, even though she knew he couldn't see them. He yawned into the phone. "Your Aunt Heidi around?"

"No ... she ran away with the milk man," he giggled.

"Smartypants. Put her on, will ya?"

"K. Love you." Rio was still young enough not to feel awkward telling his mother that he loved her.

"Right back at ya."

"Reed?" Heidi had taken the phone from her son.

"He's not overdoing it, is he?" she inquired, worried by his earlier yawn.

"No, he just woke up. No fever, and his lunch stayed down."

Reed could feel the knot in her stomach loosen a bit with the reassuring news. "I told him I'd do the RPG thing tomorrow, so make sure he gets lots of rest okay?"

"No problem." Dishes clattered, and Reed guessed that Heidi was preparing supper or cleaning up from a late lunch. "What time should he go on-line?"

"I don't know what the schedule will be like here, so I'll phone first." It occurred to her that the time difference might present an obstacle to keeping her promise.

"Sounds good. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Bye." She hit end and put the cell back in her pocket. "What now?" Reed asked of the empty room. Someone would come get her when she was needed on the set, so she sat and evaluated her options.

The book was sitting on top of the notes for the cattle call and she took it as a sign, reaching across the length of the couch to retrieve it.

Why couldn't they put these things on disk? The small type was beginning to get to her, but she couldn't put the book down, reading on 'til she had finished a section. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, reflecting on the characters and the storyline. Her doubts about playing Dar were quickly evaporating. *I can do this.* She mentally pictured scenes and blocked shots, getting a handle on how she would approach various mannerisms.

Letting the scenes flow, she watched the pictures unfold in her mind's eye—imagining the first meeting of the two protagonists and the look on Kerry's face as she found out her company was being assimilated. She could see the confused fear on ... *Jae's face. Whoa.* She sat up. *Why on earth?* Thinking furiously, she chalked it up to having no lead actress to mentally cast, since Miller had backed out.

A soft knock interrupted her before she could dwell on it too long. "They're ready for you now, Ms. Lewis."

She didn't respond, just grabbed her script and left the trailer,

speculating on the quality of cattle in the call.

* * *

Jae smiled as Reed entered the room. She'd been sorry that their lunch was cut short by a business call. The tall actress was no longer such an enigma to her. What others called ice, Jae was beginning to recognize as professional detachment.

"Reed Lewis, this is Gwen McKitrick. Gwen, meet Reed." She watched as the two women shook hands, each regarding the other appraisingly. As disappointed as she had been to look up and see Reed had vanished from her office, she was equally ecstatic to find McKitrick's agent was the person on the other end of the phone. She still wanted the part and was willing to come in and read for Jae that afternoon. During the course of the exchange Jae discovered that the only reason the actress hadn't been cast originally was a fear that she would be perceived as too young.

"Shall we?" she asked. The blonde actress had arrived a little while earlier, and Jae had given her the chance to read over the section. She crossed her fingers. The reading would double as a walk through, and if it worked out, this would be the first scene they filmed—hopefully as early as tomorrow night. Reed and Gwen both nodded and took up places opposite each other, with Gwen perching on the top of a table.

"Look, Ray, I told you.... Um, sorry, I thought you were someone else." It was a good sign. Gwen wasn't just reading, she was trying to be Kerry.

"Dar Roberts."

"Kerry Stuart. Are you, um," she paused, "I mean, you're from the new headquarters, right? I'm sorry. I must seem kind of daft to you. I wasn't expecting anyone until after lunch." McKitrick was hitting just the right mix of hesitancy and confusion.

"Yes. I am. I suppose my lunch doesn't quite match yours." Reed's tone was every inch as cool as Jae imagined the character being. "Sorry."

"Oh, right, well that's okay, because I—I finished lunch already myself, but my staff is still out. What, I mean, can I get you some coffee, or something?" Here Gwen added a touch of awkward apology.

"No, thanks. I've got things scheduled. Let's just get started; it won't take long. Sit down." Reed's body language had become commanding, firm, but not over-the-top rigid. Jae smiled and continued to watch and

listen, sure that she had found her Kerry but wanting to see where they would take the rest of the scene.

"You know why I'm here, right?"

"I know you people are taking over, they really didn't tell us much about what was going to happen, no." Confidence began to creep into Gwen's words.

"I'm not going to play games or beat around the bush. Bottom line is, what we purchased was your business." This time it was Reed whose tone conveyed a touch of apology before regaining its confidence.

The blonde woman took a breath. "Okay, but what does that mean? We report to different people, or you want things done differently? I have reports..."

"It means we're interested in the services you're providing, not in how you provide them, or who does it. There's nothing you do here we can't do better, and cheaper, which is the whole point."

Jae was impressed, they had the timing right, Reed's last lines having cut into Gwen's perfectly. She looked over at Cait to get her reaction and received a small thumbs up.

"What are you saying?" Gwen asked softly. "You're saying you don't need us, is that it?"

"Yes."

"You can't just come in here and fire everyone. We've been doing this for years. You can't replace us just like that." So far so good, McKitrick had avoided appearing to whine.

"Yes, I can. It's what we do. I have a programming group in Huntingdon, a support group just west of the airport that can take your calls, and a hardware installers division all who already work for me. Your people are inefficient, they take two sick days apiece every three weeks, half of them are late every day, your programmers haven't met a deadline in two years, and you've had eighteen workman's comp claims in the last four months." Reed was totally the corporate raider, explaining to the conquered just why they'd lost the war.

The director watched to see how the next set of lines would be delivered. *Can McKitrick display the right amount of mettle?*

"I guess John was right," she finally said, in quiet defeat.

"Right about what?" Reed had successfully switched from commanding to confused.

"You are here just to rape us." *Bingo. Perfect.* Jae knew she had found her Kerry.

"That's not an appropriate way to refer to it."

“What are you going to do, fire me?”

Jae broke in before Reed could deliver the next line. “That’s a wrap, people. Looks like we found our Kerry.” She knew she had a grin plastered across her lips, but she didn’t care. Finally things were going her way and she didn’t give a damn about who knew how she felt.

Her enthusiasm must have been infectious because Cait was smiling, as were Gwen and her agent. She looked to Reed, and arched a questioning brow, pleased when a twinkling blue eye raised a brow of its own in returned pleasure and approval.

It was, she thought, a good day.

FOUR

Jae shoved aside the empty carton and picked up her pencil. The computer stared balefully, their truce by no means certain. It had crashed twice already, each time swallowing calculations and budget figures. Finally, she'd just printed the sections she needed and entered the information by hand; she had what she needed, the number of shooting days—51. Fewer days than Roan had scheduled, but still too many for the budget they had left.

She spread out a calendar and began blocking out the days. Jae circled the next day, Wednesday, then counting off the number of days they'd be in LA, she circled October the tenth. That would have them finished in Michigan on the twenty-third. No snow.

Leaning back in the chair, she looked at the calendar. They needed fewer shooting days, and they needed to have snow by the time they hit Michigan. Instead of beating herself over the head with the schedule, Jae put it aside, content to let her subconscious work on it for a bit. There were plenty of other details to work out.

Three parts had been recast, the original actors no longer available. Jae dug out their bios and reread them. They'd been especially lucky to get Jared Sykes. He'd lend a distinguished air to Kerry's father, Senator Stuart. Rafe Evans was a different story. He'd make a credible villain, but Jae wished that she'd been able to recast the part of Kyle. Evans had a reputation, and one potential prima donna on a set was enough. Rachel Muniz rounded out the new additions, and would play the part of Michelle Graver, a foil for Reed's character, Dar.

Yesterday's audition had added the final element; Gwen McKittrick had been cast as Kerrison Stuart. Blonde and five foot five, she was a good contrast to the darker, taller Reed. The audition had been great, but something was still missing. So far, Reed Lewis had been the epitome of stoic professionalism—though somewhat aloof, and Jae was finding her pleasant to direct. What she lacked in enthusiasm for the role, she made up for in sheer preparedness and talent.

It just wasn't going to be enough.

Jae didn't know how Roan had planned to handle it, but Reed's attitude was going to make shooting a lesbian romance very difficult. She hadn't come right out and admitted to being homophobic, but the implication had been strongly given. A political thriller with throw away sex scenes had little requirement for a connection between the leads, nor

did it call for sustained emotional affinity. But along with Roan's title *Balance of Power*, they had also scrapped the script, going with both the film's original script and its title. *Tropical Storm* was a very different movie and would hinge on the audience believing that the actresses playing Dar and Kerry were a couple on screen, and she wasn't sure Reed could pull that off in her current state.

She turned the problem over in her mind, adding it to her thoughts about the shooting schedule. Electrified, she grabbed a fresh set of calendar sheets and began marking off the shoot in a different order.

Forty-one.

Satisfied, Jae read over the notes, double-checking the dates. Two more days in Los Angeles, since they were already scheduled to shoot the footage Chambers wanted, then five days in Orlando, two more weeks in LA, five days in Miami, then home to LA for the final week.

While she had Lewis, McKittrick and Muniz in Orlando, Cait could supervise the second unit's footage of the supporting cast. Unorthodox, but in the end, cheaper. They wouldn't even have had to go to Miami, except that the sun set on the opposite coast in the east, and you couldn't fake that on the Pacific.

It was perfect—and maybe it would solve her other problem. Jae held her arms over her head, rotating them around the shoulder joint trying to ease the burning ache that had settled in the muscles where her neck and back met.

"Looks like I've gone about as far as I can for one night." She spoke to the squat stone gargoyle guarding her desk. He didn't disagree, so she stood and grabbed her bag and keys.

Universal Studios was still abuzz with activity, and she could see the bright shooting lights coming from Little Europe. Behind her, laughter and the sounds of busy nightlife activity reminded her that she worked in the middle of one of the largest commercial playgrounds in the world.

This was a lot different than shooting in remote locations or gathering background footage, and it was a lot different than shooting as primary director on her own pictures. For one thing, it was a lot noisier—she laughed—and much better funded.

She turned the corner from her office and stopped. Reed's Range Rover was still nestled in its spot. *Reed's still here?* Jae was puzzled. She'd sent the cast home just after four, and it was going on ten now.

The path to her right led back toward the sound stage and backlot trailers, and she took the right hand fork, opting to check Reed's trailer first. It was the right guess. Soft yellow light showed through the

material of the curtains. She crept forward, unsure as to why she felt the compulsion to look in on the actress and with even less of a clue as to why she was tip-toeing along the asphalt.

Reed was sprawled full out along the three-quarter length settee, one arm propped under her head, reading. She seemed totally absorbed by the novel, and Jae realized that she must have been reading for quite some time, if the still open curtain and the thickness of pages tucked between the actress' thumb and the front cover were any indication.

Jae smiled reflexively as Reed smiled at something she had just read. The change in the actress' face was amazing as unguarded enjoyment was allowed free rein. It transformed her, and Jae sucked in an involuntary breath. Not wanting to be caught invading Reed's privacy she backed away, returning the way she had come. Just in front of her a crowd was gathered at the lot snack shop, and an idea took shape.

Fifteen minutes and three dollars and fifty cents later she was safely ensconced in her Saturn, ready to leave the studio behind in favour of her own dinner and a hot bath.

* * *

Reed shut the book, sticking a slip of paper between the pages to mark her place, and got up to answer the rapping which had interrupted her reading. It was probably a studio security guard, but she peeked through the curtain next to the door just to be safe. It was a studio employee all right, but not a security guard. Curious, she opened the door, raising a questioning brow at the uniformed youth before her.

He swallowed nervously then handed up the brown paper bag she had only just noticed he was carrying. "I'm supposed to deliver this," he mumbled, Midwestern drawl or laziness eating most of his words.

She handed him a crumpled one and took the bag in exchange, slightly confused by the delivery, and shut the door. *What in the hell?* Opening the bag, she removed a pile of napkins, a plastic knife, a Coke and a Styrofoam container. After setting everything else down, she picked up the glossy white container and opened it.

Hot dogs. The smell of moist bread mixed with the distinct aroma of raw onions and boiled wieners wafted through the trailer. A small square of paper was tucked between the container and the packets of condiments. Reed set the container back down and retrieved the note.

Thought you might be hungry.

Her stomach picked up the smell and rumbled in agreement with the director's sentiment. She looked over at the small clock, registering how late it was and how long ago lunch had been. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth—especially one that came bearing her favorite food—she added ketchup and mustard to the hot dogs, unaware of the smile lighting her face.

Reed took a large bite then sat back down. Chewing contentedly she picked up the Coke and popped the tab. It was significantly later than she had meant to stay, and she was surprised that the book had held her attention as long as it had. She was not normally one for marathon reading sessions. She picked up the second hot dog, pausing to wash the last bite of the first one down, and idly reflected on the information that Jae herself was either still around the studio or had just recently left.

10:15. Should I? It would be the polite thing to do. Reed snickered softly at the thought. *Like I've ever worried about appearing polite.* Truth was though, she found herself liking the young director in spite of her reservations. Decision made, she ate the last bite of the hot dog, briefly wishing there were one more hiding in the carton, and gathered up her stuff, tucking the novel into the pocket of her leather trench coat alongside her cell.

The hustle and bustle of the world's busiest movie studio assaulted her senses the second she stepped from the trailer. Reed closed the door firmly, then locked it before heading across the back lot. Jae's Saturn was gone. She was surprised by the fleeting disappointment that she felt looking at the empty space. *Tomorrow then.* Reed moved to her own vehicle, unlocking the rental with the remote. She tossed her notes and the script onto the passenger seat and slid behind the wheel.

It had been, she reflected, a good first day. Hectic and challenging—definitely—but also very satisfying. Tomorrow they would roll tape on two scenes, and she was looking forward to seeing the dailies. Maybe it was the fact that most of the cast were TV actors, or that Jae herself wasn't a Hollywood name, but Reed hadn't sensed any of that prima donna bullshit she remembered from her last picture.

Torque. That didn't really count did it? She hadn't finished it, hadn't gone to see the version they'd finally released either.

Her exit was coming up and she slowed the car in preparation for changing lanes, then moved across and turned on Cahuenga. Whatever the reason for the different feel, she wasn't going to question it too

closely. *Now if only Rio were here.* She missed her son, hadn't wanted to leave him behind in Maine, but hadn't had any alternative. He needed to be close to the hospital and in a stable place. A film set was no place for a healthy child, let alone one facing major surgery.

She fought off the urge to phone and check on him. Heidi would not appreciate a two-thirty wake up call. Her friend had been one of the few bright spots in an otherwise dismal half-decade. Childhood confidante and college roommate, Heidi Chappelle, and her husband had opened their farm to Reed and her son, asking no questions, giving no censure.

The dark outline of the driveway beckoned her forward and she hit the switch on the garage door opener, activating the mechanism. Five minutes later she had changed from her studio clothes to her bathrobe. Calling home was out, so she decided a warm bath was just what she needed.

The antique style tub was the perfect length and she stretched her long frame fully, reveling in the soothing warmth and buoyancy of the water. Reed closed her eyes and let the day dissolve, the water cleaning more than her body.

As was her wont during filming and rehearsals she replayed scenes in her head, mentally rehearsing. She wasn't sure of exactly when the shooting script morphed into the book it had been adapted from, but she didn't fight it, continuing to let the water lap against her skin, carrying the tension away. Nor was she aware of the exact point her mind chose to again cast Jae as Kerry, drifting off to sleep as she watched the images she had read come to life in her imagination.

* * *

Reed wasn't sure which woke her first, the cold water in the tub or the insistent pain in her lower back. Wincing, she stood in the tub, goosebumps covering her skin as the cool morning air brushed over its wetness.

Her foot touched a solid object on the bottom of the tub. *The book.* She'd forgotten she'd taken it to the tub with her, placing it on the edge in case she had wanted to read more of the story. A wry smile hovered over her lips as her perverse sense of humour kicked in. *Good thing I didn't have it on disk, bubble bath is hell on hard drives.*

She fished the soggy tome from the frigid water, stifling a shiver. *Of all the stupid things.* Falling asleep in the bathtub was not only dumb, but not terribly good for the back either. The novel had expanded to roughly

four times its normal thickness, and the back cover came away in her hand.

Reed wondered if she should ask Jae for another copy or search one out in a bookstore. Not quite halfway through the story, she'd found herself thoroughly engrossed by the lives of two women who, the author professed, were simply ordinary people. Not a word she would have used to describe those kinds of people. On the other hand they were fictional characters, not real people, and she suspected real life was a far cry from the idyll presented in the book.

Finished toweling her hair, she studied her face in the mirror, surprised at the absence of the ever-present dark circles under her baby blues. "Make-up will be glad of that I bet."

Reed pulled a pair of pants off a hanger in the closet and reflected that at least she didn't have to dress like her character did to go to work. Not tucking in the white priest neck shirt, she exited the bedroom and headed for the coffee pot, only to remember that she hadn't bought coffee.

"Fuck." The appliance mocked her, and she stared evilly at it. "Careful, bucko, or I'll make tea in you." That was, as far as she could tell, the one advantage of a hotel over a house. In a hotel you could always get coffee.

"Starbucks it is then." *Do they have Starbucks in LA? Of course they do—every town has a Starbucks—it's a constitutional right.*

It was still dark, dawn barely cresting the horizon as she sped along the nearly empty freeway; though by the time she'd found coffee and slid the Rover into her parking space, the sun had come up and the day had begun.

It didn't surprise her in the least that the silver Saturn was already tucked in its slot. Jae had probably been here before dawn, so she made her way along the twisting path to the bungalow assigned to RenFaire. Reed hesitated at the door, awkwardness overwhelming her desire to reciprocate last night's friendly gesture. *Friendly gesture.* That's what it was, wasn't it? By returning it, was she accepting the offer? No. She was just being polite. That decided, she knocked softly on the door.

"C'min." Jae sat at her desk, pencil held between her teeth as she stared in bewilderment at the computer in front of her. "What can I do for you?" the director asked without turning around. Then she perked up a bit. "Hey, is that coffee I smell? Cait, you're a babe."

"It's Reed." She moved closer to the desk and waited until the blonde turned around before handing over a cup. "You struck me as a café latte

kind of person.”

Green eyes studied her intently, not making her as nervous this morning as they had yesterday. “Mocha java, chocolate milk, regular coffee instead of espresso.”

The actress was impressed. “The smell could have given away the mocha bit—but how’d you guess about the espresso?”

Jae laughed. “When we were going over the scene yesterday, I remember you flinching at the description of café con leche, and muttering something about it being worse than espresso.”

Without talking they sipped their respective beverages, letting the caffeine do its job. It was Reed who finally broke the silent communion. “Thanks.”

Jae held up her cup. “Likewise. What are friends for?”

Friends. Reed found she liked the sound of that.

* * *

“What do you think?”

“Good rough cut. You can still see the tension between them, with just a hint of something else under the surface.”

Jae yawned and laid one arm over the film editor’s shoulder. “That’s all for today and thanks.”

“Today was yesterday two and a half hours ago,” the editor returned with a yawn of his own.

“In that case, take the rest of the day off. I’ll shut down.”

“Night, Jae.”

Left alone, silence fell over the editing bay, and Jae stifled another yawn. Four hours of taping reduced to a hundred and twenty-six feet, a lot of work for three and a half minutes of film. Shooting had gone surprisingly well and the crew had pulled together quickly, doing both the first and second unit footage. It had made for a very long, intense day, especially for the leads, but the scene was laid, and she was still conscious, so it had to be counted as a good day.

Hitting rewind she decided to review the footage one last time before calling it a night. Question was—did she drive home, or simply stay at the studio? Two hours was not a lot of time to drive home, sleep and get back to work. Jae flicked play and watched the scene unfold before her eyes.

Something was still off. That was the only word she could think of. Jae rewound the tape and watched it again, trying to pinpoint at exactly

which point the feeling began. Three more times she rewound the tape before it struck her. *The book*. The internal dialogue she remembered so clearly from the book version of *Tropical Storm* was missing from the scene, and without it, was the scene actually conveying the message she wanted it to?

You're being silly, Jae m'grrl. In spite of her self-admonition, she rewound the tape one last time. Closing her eyes, she leaned back in her chair and just listened to the scene. Reed's rich voice mixed with Gwen's alto tones as they verbally sparred. Mentally Jae tried to match emotions to the tones, already happy with the body language and blocking.

Satisfied that Gwen's animosity never crossed the line into hate and that Reed had managed the fine line between detached and intrigued, she shut the machine down. She caught sight of her reflection in one of the monitors. "You really need to lighten up Jae. It's just a rough cut," the director scolded herself, the clock on the wall giving lie to the sentiment.

Her office wasn't far from the editing and sound studios, and she wandered through the crisp morning air, enjoying the quiet hmm of innumerable insects and the occasional whirring of wings that revealed the nocturnal stalkers of insects swooping down on their prey unseen.

A lot of *Tropical Storm* was internal dialogue, and that could make conveying her message more difficult. Real people didn't usually go around narrating their feelings into empty air. Pets were good devices for that, and Jae could picture Kerry's character talking to her goldfish. Hell, she herself talked to the gargoyle on her desk.

Unfortunately, it was Reed's character whose internal dialogue revealed so much more of Dar's emotions than did her verbal dialogue.

Her footfalls reverberated through the empty hall, filling the silent space with their echoes. The office was equally quiet, and Jae sank onto the couch pausing only long enough to kick off her shoes. Still fretting about the problem of how to handle the internal dialogue, she dropped into an exhausted slumber, the next day's rehearsals overlaying the worry and painting pictures in Jae's dreams.

"Good Lord, Jae, please don't tell me you slept here all night."

One green eye opened under protest. "Okay, I won't. Did you bring coffee?" The other eye reluctantly joined its companion in greeting the morning, and Jae looked up at her slightly out of focus and bemused assistant.

"No, but I can do a coffee run if you want." Caitlynn had moved

across the room and was booting up the computer.

"S'alright. I'll grab something from the food bar."

"I'll do it, now that you've mentioned it. I need one too. Back in a flash."

Jae stood, then bent over and slowly straightened, feeling each vertebrae in her spine settle back into place, then looked at the gargoyles. "Remind me to get hide-a-bed for the office." She grabbed her toothbrush from the top drawer of her desk and headed for the washroom.

Much better. It was, she considered, amazing how much better the simple act of brushing one's teeth could make you feel. A last rinse and she shut off the light and left the small washroom behind. The delicate aroma of freshly brewed coffee assaulted her nostrils the second she neared her office door. Jae took a deep breath, savouring the smell, nerves already perking up in anticipation of a caffeine infusion.

She expected to find Caitlynn pecking away at the computer and a white Styrofoam cup of coffee waiting on her desk. But the office was still empty and instead of a plain cup of catering truck sludge, a brown and green Starbucks paper one waited instead.

Nestled right next to the cup was a biscotti, chocolate swirls marbling the cream coloured cookie. *Reed.* She didn't question how she knew it had been the actress. After removing the plastic lid, she dipped a finger in the frothy cream, then licked it from her finger. "Umm." The full-bodied scent filled her lungs and a smile touched her lips.

"Here you go." Caitlynn broke off. "Where did that come from?" The brunette was holding two cups of steaming coffee and had a brown paper sack tucked under one arm.

Jae finished dipping the cookie into the coffee and took a bite before answering. "Found it on my desk when I came back in." She wasn't sure why, but she was reluctant to tell Cait who she thought the coffee had come from.

"Secret admirer, hunh? All the more for me then." The bag opened to reveal two large croissants and a handful of butter pats.

"Oh, I dunno about that." Jae scooped up a croissant and some butter.

"Figures." Caitlynn sat behind her own desk and started to skim through email.

Jae was still thinking about how difficult it was to translate emotion and less tangible qualities to the screen. "Arrange a meeting for eleven thirty with the cast and crew."

"Aye aye, Captain," Caitlynn acknowledged with her standard 'the

boss is in boss mode' quip.

They'd been co-workers a long time and friends even longer, and Jae stuck her tongue out, surprising a laugh from the other woman, before tackling the mound of documentation on her desk.

She'd gotten Chambers to give her the same degree of control that Roan had had over the picture and its production, pending his approval of the revised shooting script. Reading through the fine print on the contract that had appeared on her desk yesterday, her eyes widened in shock. Chambers had left the salary the same, as well as the percentage profit clause. A hand-scribbled note on a Post-it added the comment: 'You promised me a money maker—we make it, you make it.' He'd even okayed the change in name for the film company, removing Roan's company, Blackmon Pictures, from the marquee. From now on, *Tropical Storm* would officially be a Pink Dishrack Film, in association with RenFaire Productions.

* * *

They had decided to break for an early lunch before having the meeting she'd originally scheduled for eleven thirty. The catering firm Caitlynn had hired was a vast improvement over the original one, and Jae found herself enjoying the vegetable samosas and chutney. Few cast members were present today, most of their scenes and roles not beginning until later in the filming schedule, but a couple of the bigger names were present and almost all of them appeared to be enjoying themselves.

Almost all.

Reed, as usual, sat off to one side, and Jae half expected her to disappear back to her trailer at any moment. The actress got up and went to the buffet table and helped herself to another hotdog, dressed it and returned to her place. Jae watched the fluid movements and mulled over her dilemma. *Maybe it isn't about 'curing' Reed's homophobia. Maybe I do have the right idea, and just need to foster an environment where Gwen and Reed can be friends.* The circle of empty space between Reed and her coworkers was easily a twenty-foot radius. *With any luck, going to Orlando first will help with that.* Her internal narrator added its two cents worth—*Maybe she just needs to meet the right woman. Jae, you are so bad,* she chastised herself, more intrigued by that thought than she really wanted to admit—even to herself.

Putting that line of thought on hold, she stood and walked to the front of the group. "Our second unit director arrived this morning, and I'd like

to introduce him.” Jae crooked a finger in his direction. “This is Michael Brust, and he will be handling second unit filming as well as some of the more comedic scenes.” She stepped back to allow him center stage and unconsciously drifted towards Reed’s observation point.

Mike was outlining some of his credits and introducing himself to the cast, and she took the opportunity to lean over a bit and whisper so that only the actress could hear her, “Thanks for the coffee. I needed it this morning.”

“You’re welcome.” Reed whispered back without turning.

“My treat tomorrow, mocha right?” She was determined to get Reed to speak to her in sentences longer than two or three words.

“Right.” Then must have thought better of her distracted response, because Reed turned and met Jae’s eyes. “With chocolate milk,” she requested then added a barely perceptible smile.

She settled down on the other side of the pillar Reed was leaning against and turned her attention to the reaction of the cast to the upcoming announcement.

“I flipped a coin with Jae and she lost, so I get to announce this.” He gave the group a boyish grin. “We’re going to Disney World.”

FIVE

The whine of aircraft engines mixed with the roar of taxiing planes and the honking of impatient drivers. Miles of concrete and asphalt stretched out like a motionless ocean of gray, broken occasionally by bright swaths of colour and flashing lights.

Reed stared out of the window as the airport limousine crawled through the early morning rush, the driver jockeying for position among the other cars and trams. To her left, jumbo jets dwarfed smaller commuter planes, and the symbols of global registry proclaimed that no place was inaccessible in this modern era of flight. Countries with gross domestic products less than half of the cost of a Boeing 747 were proudly represented along with the domestic stalwarts.

They continued to crawl past terminals until finally they came to a stop at terminal six. Since they had arrived on time and alive, Reed grabbed her carry-on and tipped the driver as he let her out. Glad for the ticket tucked in her upper left pocket, Reed skipped the main line and headed for the Continental VIP counter to check her bag and receive her seating assignment.

“Anything to carry on?”

“Just this.” Reed held up her laptop. The studio had taken care of picking up and checking the rest of her luggage.

“Does it work?”

Reed leaned over the counter and whispered, “Do you?”

The brunette smiled coldly and handed her a blue boarding pass. “Seat 2b, Gate 78. Enjoy your flight.”

“Enjoy yours.” Reed gave the ticket agent a plastic smile of her own.

“Good morning, Reed. Miss out on morning coffee?”

Reed turned to find the blonde director quirked an amused brow at her and shrugged. She stood back and watched as Jae took her place at the counter.

They still had some time before their flight, and Reed headed for the Starbucks kiosk centered between the gates. She sipped idly at the hot beverage and watched Jae accept her own container, gingerly cupping it in her palm. Looking more closely she could see the faux flesh coloured Band-Aids on the director’s pinkie and ring fingers. When she realized Jae was watching her, she turned her eyes away, quickly feigning an intense interest in the bare plaster and gyprock walls under construction. Slowly, Reed counted drywall screws, waiting until an

acceptable amount of time had passed before turning back around. *Damn.* Jae was still bemusedly watching her, green eyes flashing in mirth.

Jae wriggled her bandaged fingers. "You're allowed to ask, you know. It could be considered an opening to polite social interaction."

"So?" She motioned at the injured limb with her free hand.

"Buttons."

It was a response so characteristic of her son that Reed smiled in spite of her tension. "How?" She requested clarification, somewhat unnecessarily she thought.

"Would you believe the high e-string on an electric guitar?" Jae admitted sheepishly.

"Been a while since you'd played?" Words to a Bryan Adams song flitted through her head. *Bought my first real six-string ... got it at the five and dime ... played it 'til my fingers bled ... was the summer of sixty-nine....*

"And how. A bunch of us did a benefit performance last night. My body can't take three sets the way it used to."

Studying Jae, Reed tried to picture the slight, leanly muscled director playing in a rock and roll band. Somehow, classical music seemed more her style, but appearances could be deceiving. "Play anything I might know?" They had moved over and taken seats near the gate, waiting for the rest of their party to arrive.

"Guitar rock mostly. Melissa Etheridge, Indigo Girls, that sort of thing. Our lead guitarist does a great cover of *Building a Mystery*."

"Sarah McLachlan, right?"

"Umm humm. There's this one riff at the beginning—it took me a long time to figure out how she managed the pull off and slide combo."

Reed sat back and listened to Jae passionately describe the lick and then demonstrate with an imaginary guitar. It seemed to her that the director did everything with a passionate intensity, throwing herself fully into whatever she was doing. She'd been like that once: eager to claim the world and sure that it was hers for the taking. But that was a long time ago.

The blonde had moved on to a discussion of alternate tunings, and Reed allowed a small smile to show, not having a clue what the other woman was going on about. *It was in tune or it wasn't. How could you have an alternate tuning?* Not that she was going to get a word in edgewise to ask. Instead she let the sound of Jae's voice mask the drone of people around her, enjoying the wait despite crowded places being among her least favourite environments.

So lost was she in the sound rather than the meaning of the words that she was momentarily confused when she noticed Jae watching her again, as though waiting for an answer. Embarrassed, Reed tried to think of something to say, before realizing that the reason Jae had stopped speaking was the arrival of the other members of the cast who were on the same flight to Orlando.

While Jae greeted everyone, Reed studied the group. Gwen McKitrick had pulled her hair back into a loose braid and opted for the baggy, no frills, "I'm nobody" look. Her companion, whom Reed recognized as one of the supporting actresses, was dressed more like Jae, in a casual, business-like pair of khakis and a plain shirt. The others, Reed assumed were technical crew, probably the director of photography and the senior set designer.

Just then the flight attendant made the pre-boarding announcement. *Maybe it wouldn't be a full flight*, Reed thought. *Right. And all these people are hanging out here hoping to sell cookbooks and earn tambourines. Not.*

"You okay?" Jae laid a warm hand on her arm.

She blew the hair from her face and considered how to answer. Her instinct was to just brush off the gentle inquiry, but instead she heard herself replying. "I really hate small spaces. Especially small, crowded spaces."

Two delicate brows knit themselves together, then parted. "One sec."

Perplexed, she followed Jae with her eyes as the director approached two actresses, and chatted with them for a moment, then smiled and made her way back over to where she was waiting. Lifting an eyebrow, she waited for an explanation.

"You were 2b, right?" Jae asked, as though just remembering that she might have missed an important detail of a plan.

Still confused, Reed nodded.

"Good, now you're 4b. It means you have to sit with me, but as compensation you're in the last row of business class. The seats in that row are a little more spacious, and there is a partition behind you instead of people." Jae was leading them toward the gate, taking her time and letting the other passengers on ahead of them. The director smiled up at her and said teasingly, "This is the part where you either say, 'Get stuffed, I'm not sharing a seat with you,' or 'thank you'."

Typically Reed hated being teased, yet for some reason she continued to let Jae get away with it. *Admit it. You like it.* She returned a sly crack of her own. "Remind me that you didn't give me a third option after I get airsick." Reed ducked into the gate, handing over her boarding pass

on the way through.

“You don’t? Reed? Reed? You are just joking right? Right?”

Reed chuckled to herself. *Two can play this game.*

In the seat next to her, Jae had already buckled in and was watching the activity on the tarmac with avid interest. The whine of the engines increased in pitch and they began to move forward, the plane eating up the expanse of runway as it gathered momentum in preparation for take-off. Watching the tarmac fly by over Jae’s shoulder, she saw the smaller woman’s jaw clench slightly and her fair skin lose a tone. Her own stomach dropped as the plane left the ground, and she felt a small hand clutch convulsively at hers. Surprised, she froze, allowing Jae to nearly break her fingers. The plane continued its ascent and then finally leveled off. Jae didn’t seem to realize she still had hold of Reed’s hand and the actress wasn’t sure what to say, so she remained silent.

An electronic ping accompanied the dousing of the seatbelt warning sign and the director shifted in her seat, opening her eyes at last. Green orbs tracked their way from Reed’s face to their joined hands and back again, a faint blush colouring the blonde’s cheeks. “Sorry.” Jae released her death hold.

Reed clenched and unclenched her hand, returning circulation to the abused appendage. “No problem, I have a spare.” She could still feel the ghostly imprint of the warm hand that had covered hers seeking reassurance, and she found herself touched by the unconscious act and the casual contact. She’d noticed Jae touched people frequently, but until now Reed herself had, for the most part, been exempt. *At least she doesn’t seem to think I’m an ogre.* It was a small crew, and she’d heard some of the grips and best boys impersonating her and speculating on her fight with Roan. Some of them blamed her for his subsequent overdose and his death, even without the autopsy results. Her reputation had apparently survived her hiatus from filmmaking.

A wicked idea planted itself in Reed’s brain and she reached for the magazine pouch, flipping past the emergency instruction card before lighting on the object of her search. Slowly she drew the paper bag out of the cloth pouch, drawing on her acting skills to appear more than a little green around the gills. Looking sideways out of the corner of one eye, she saw Jae’s eyes widen and the blonde shrink back against the window.

“Reed! You’re not serious?”

Bringing the bag to her face she opened the top and spit her gum into it then folded the top neatly down and grinned at Jae.

"You have a warped sense of humour." The other woman settled back down in her seat, reclining it backwards and putting her feet out in front of her.

Reed made a show of looking from side to side before whispering conspiratorially, "Shhh, if they find out the sense of humour removal operation was a failure, they'll come for me." Pressing on the button under the armrest, she released the catch on her seat and reclined it back to match Jae's. She closed her eyes for a moment, smiling at the memory of the look on Jae's face. She didn't play often, usually only with Rio or, more rarely, Heidi, but she found those rigid, self-imposed barriers crumbling around the woman beside her. A sudden shadow made Reed open her eyes.

"Can I get you ladies something to drink?" Another of the ubiquitous uniformed Femme-bots leaned over them.

Jae touched her arm and gave her a slight smile and a shake of her head, as though saying, 'Be nice,' so she nodded pleasantly. "Coffee, please."

"Make that two," Jae chimed in.

Reed took the cup and rested it on her stomach, feeling the warmth spread over her body, a sigh of contentment escaping before she could pull it back. The captain's voice cut through her reverie as he introduced himself, then revealed their altitude, airspeed and flying time to Orlando. *Five more hours.* She glanced at her companion. Somehow this flight didn't seem nearly as onerous as she had thought it might be.

Careful to avoid spilling the hot coffee, she maneuvered her laptop to the fold down tray and unzipped the case one handed. Booting up, she waited for the splash screen to appear before adjusting the monitor. Within seconds the machine began to beep. "Damn," she cursed.

Jae looked up from her book. "What's up?"

"Forgot to charge the battery." She shut it down and began to put it away; maybe the trip was going to be longer than she thought after all.

"You could always read." The director held up her own reading material.

The actress shook her head, "That's what the laptop was for." She paused, then sheepishly admitted, "I dropped the paper copy in the bathtub."

Green eyes crinkled in empathy and mirth. "I've lost a few that way myself." She sat up a bit and turned toward Reed. "How far along were you?"

"End of Chapter 16—just before Bosses' day." Judging by the

bookmark, it looked as if Jae had gotten at least that far. If not, then the director should be familiar with the scene from the script. It seemed to be shaping up as a pivotal part of the book, and Reed had to admit she couldn't wait to see how Dar handled volunteerism Kerry-style.

"I'm not much past that part myself. I have an idea."

Warily she looked at Jae, trying to decide if the director was setting her up for payback from the earlier gag, or if she was serious. "What?"

"We could take turns."

Hmm, that would be easy on her eyes, she could just rest them until it was her turn to have the book. "Okay."

"You want to go first or should I?"

"Go ahead, it's your book." She settled back in her chair to wait her turn, then sat upright as a soft, mellow voice filled the small space between them.

"The condo was very quiet, as Dar keyed the lock and entered, flipping on the hallway light. It was cool inside, for which she was grateful, but she was suddenly struck by the emptiness of the place, something that had never occurred to her before."

She's reading to me. Out loud. Reed looked around nervously, afraid that someone else could hear them.

"You okay?"

No. Of course I'm not. You can't expect me to read that ... that book out loud ... in public. Reed didn't know what to say.

"This is really hard for you isn't it?"

Did she really want to discuss this? Jae didn't sound condemning, just concerned. "Yes," she admitted.

"Well, right now they're still just friends. How about you read it, and if you get to anything that makes you uncomfortable to read aloud, we'll stop."

It sounded like a reasonable proposal except for the fact that she hated to read out loud. *Out of the frying pan.* She took the proffered book and stared at it for a couple of minutes, then started to read, unconsciously 'playing' Dar as she did.

"Good." Dar handed her the cracker and went back to her own plate. The blond woman nibbled the lobster. 'Mmm.' Kerry glanced up at the watching faces, startled to see quiet, knowing smiles there. 'I usually stick to shrimp,' she explained sheepishly, giving them puzzled looks as they exchanged glances and started their own dinners. Wonder what that was all about? she mused, then shrugged, and went to work on her stubborn lobster."

Engrossed in the story, Reed missed the turn Dar and Kerry's relationship took from friendship into romance, the kiss inevitable and right as it came under the moonlight at Crandon Beach.

A chapter later, a soft breath rushed across her shoulder, and she broke off reading to check on her companion. Jae had fallen asleep and was slumped against the slight ridge that joined their two seats, since Reed's wasn't as far back.

Another couple of inches and the blonde would be nestled against her right side. As if making the observation had tempted fate, Jae shifted slightly in her sleep and came to rest with her head pillowed on Reed's right shoulder. Unlike earlier when the director had unexpectedly taken her hand, she didn't freeze, just tucked a loose wisp of hair off her friend's face. *Must have had a late night. That, or I'm the most boring reader on the planet.* Reed smiled to herself, remembering trying unsuccessfully to get Rio to sleep by reading to him. *Yeah, but face it, 'Where the Wild Things Are' isn't exactly sleepy-time material.*

Putting the book aside temporarily, Reed fished the Skylink cell phone out of its retaining clip, careful not to disturb her slumbering friend, and dialed the number for home. Waiting for someone to pick up, she settled back into her seat, letting Jae snuggle in closer.

* * *

Sandalwood mixed with vanilla tugged at Jae's senses and she shifted against the pillow, trying to capture more of the pleasantly elusive scent. *Pillow?* Gradually, as she drifted up through the layers of slumber, she became aware of the warm body she was snuggled against.

The crisp smell of clean cotton added itself to Reed's unique fragrance, bringing a lazy smile to her lips. Lingering between dreams and full waking, she contemplated staying put, letting Reed's physical presence anchor her. The murmuring of passengers and the clink of china joined forces to bring her closer to wakefulness and she lingered one last moment, savouring the contact before stretching slightly and shifting her weight away from Reed's shoulder.

Easing one eye open, she checked on the actress' reaction to being used as a human mattress, only to find that her seatmate had joined her in the Land of Nod. Relieved that her physical violation of Reed's personal space had gone unnoticed she ran her fingers through her hair, returning it to its carelessly mussed state. *With any luck you were asleep before I decided to use you as a pillow.*

The airline drone was nearing their seat with the lunch offering, and she wondered whether or not to wake Reed. Instead she slid the lunch trays onto her pull down table and happily poked through the contents.

"You going to share, or were you just going to eat my chips while I slept unsuspecting?" Reed's voice was warm and friendly, and Jae was startled when the actress leaned over to poke in her lunch basket, allowing their bodies to come into casual contact as she did so.

"Umm, no," came her lame answer. The fact that she was holding two oranges sort of spoke for itself, and Jae sheepishly put one back.

"Indeed," Reed drawled, blue eyes twinkling.

Something in Reed's attitude toward her had changed. *Not something; she's being friendly.* The actress had been cordial enough during their previous interactions but there had seemed to be a 'look but don't touch' barrier surrounding her. In fact, come to think of it, the only person she could remember seeing talking to Reed at all during down time on the set had been herself. "So you were actually going to eat that orange?" she countered.

Reed drew her thumb and forefinger across her chin several times. "Tell you what ... spring for a decent cup of coffee in Houston, and you can have the orange."

She pretended to weigh the offer and the orange. "Throw in the banana, and you have a deal."

"I get the raisins too then."

Jae laughed. "Deal." She handed over the raisins and rescued the fruit from its place of banishment. Silently they ate, handing over the empty food bins to the efficient stewardess with the regulation smile.

Judging they had about twenty minutes before the plane began its descent into Houston, Jae decided a trip to the washroom might be prudent. Rising in her seat she stood and half-turned toward Reed. "Beep, beep."

The actress rose slightly and moved her knees to allow Jae to slide by. As she did Jae's back and thighs came into sliding contact with the taller woman. Quickly the director leaned forward, and nearly forced the reclined seat to the front upright. A strong hand caught her waist before she could fall into the aisle, and Reed's blue eyes reflected genuine concern. "Okay?"

"Fine, just a little light-headed," Jae smiled wanly, turning for the washroom right behind them. *Just a little air-headed, you mean. Jesus, Jae, what in blazes are you thinking?* Her body very plainly knew exactly what she was thinking, and she was glad to be able to step out of view

and into the small washroom. Her skin still throbbed where Reed's hand had supported her. Looking at her reflection in the small mirror she could see the faint pink tint of arousal. "You're going to be in very big trouble if you don't watch yourself."

Finishing up and drying her hands, she looked again at her image to make sure all signs of Reed's unexpected effect on her body had vanished. Satisfied, she put the paper towel in the proper receptacle and headed back to her seat, then stopped. Sitting back down meant a repeat performance of how she got out.

Her dilemma was resolved when Reed stood and left her seat, moving past Jae and into the washroom herself. Relieved, she sank into her seat and buckled up, anticipating the warning light for the plane's descent.

No sooner had Reed returned than the warning chime sounded, and Jae felt the pressure shift in her ears. Her left hand flexed convulsively. Usually Becky had held her hand during take-off and landing, and while Reed hadn't said anything about the take-off, Jae wasn't sure she could trust herself or her body to take the actress' hand again so soon after her last reaction.

Mercifully it was a good landing, and as she exited the plane into the hot Southern air, she mentally patted herself on the back. *Only one more take-off and landing, and we're home free. But man, do I need a caffeine fix.* That ought to hold her through the next take-off, and the alcohol she could justify drinking during the afternoon portion of her flight should take the edge off of the final landing. *Yeah, but admit it. Having someone's hand to hold is a whole lot nicer.* Her eyes flickered over the woman in front of her, *especially that hand....*

Shaking her head at her own audacity she followed the actress through the bustling terminal, wondering if Reed had a built in coffee sensor. The determined path the actress was charting through the throng left little doubt in Jae's mind that she either had a phenomenal sense of smell or had been to this airport during a layover more than once.

Overhead the airport sound system was piping in country music mixed with mellower 80's tunes and she smiled at the strains of music, just able to make out snatches of the lyrics. "... We had it all ... just like Bogey and Bacall ... sailing away to Key Largo...." Unconsciously Jae sang along with the music.

"Are you sure you need coffee?" Reed asked teasingly.

"Unless you want me sleeping on your shoulder all the way to Orlando, I do." It was out before she realized she'd said it. *Bright one, babe.* To her surprise, Reed didn't seem bothered by the remark at all.

"There are worse fates—you could be prone to airsickness," Reed joked in return.

"Who are you and what have you done with Reed?" The moment she said it, Jae knew it was a mistake. She'd gone too far and she saw a cloud of hurt shadow the clear ice eyes, the barrier that had been so briefly dropped now firmly back in place. The actress took her coffee from the barista and left Jae standing there.

Damn. She watched Reed walk back toward the gate, long legs eating up the distance, and it was all she could do to keep from running after her. *And what would you say, exactly?* Sighing, she took her own coffee from the counter and added a generous amount of vanilla sugar to it.

"Ice Queen diss you?"

Maybe it was guilt for having hurt Reed's feelings or the lingering glimpse of the woman the actress had briefly let her see, Jae wasn't sure, but she rounded on the speaker, not caring that it was one of her lead actresses. "Don't ever let me hear you refer to Reed like that again, to me or anyone else on the set ... is that clear?"

Gwen nodded, both actresses looking stunned at her defense of Reed.

"Good." With that Jae turned her back on the other two and made her way to the departure lounge, where hopefully she would get a chance to apologize.

* * *

You expected her to be different, why? Reed propelled herself through the busy airport traffic, idle passengers and rushing commuters alike moving out of her way. Locating a smoking lounge, she ducked inside the glassed in room. *And that excuses your behavior, how?*

Three left. Taking one of the remaining Dunhills out of the gold and burgundy packaging, she flipped the lid on the silver Zippo and struck the flint. The butane flame ignited the end, and she inhaled the pungent blue smoke deep into her lungs. Four days of reduced nicotine intake had rendered the effects more potent, and she immediately felt the light-headed calm she was used to seeping over her.

Jesus, you'd think what she thought of you mattered. She flicked gray ash into the sand filled ashtray. *It does.* Reed acknowledged. *For some reason, it does.* A last drag on the cigarette and she stubbed out the butt, leaving it half unsmoked. Across the room a craggy, rumpled man watched her warily, waiting to see if she was going to leave before slipping over to rescue the remnants of the tobacco from the container.

"You'll need to find your own light." Reed tossed him the last couple of cigarettes and left the lounge, not bothering to check how her gesture was received.

"That was nice." Jae stood watching her, a tentative smile ready to flee her features.

She shrugged. "It happens."

"More often than you let on, I bet."

The director fell into step next to her, and Reed resisted the impulse to stretch her stride and leave the other woman behind.

"I'm sorry, Reed.... I don't know you well enough to tease you like that." Jae cut in front of her and stopped, putting a hand on the actress' arm, green eyes becoming solemn. "But I'd like to—if you'll forgive me, that is."

You had your shot. Instinct warred with experience, instinct winning out. "No harm, no foul." She kept her voice deliberately casual, thankful that Jae didn't seem inclined to call her on her drama queen antics.

Instead the blonde gave her a wide smile and moved back to her side. "Cool." And that was that. Together they unhurriedly walked back through the airport, occasionally stopping to poke in the various stores lining the busy corridors.

"Hey, check this out." Jae pointed at a western apparel shop. The indicated shelves were lined with flat, round pieces of felt in assorted colours.

Reed followed her friend across the width of the hall and leaned against a wooden post that was pretending to hold up the shop's roof. Jae had a brown felt hat in one hand and a black one in the other, holding them at eye level and looking speculatively in her direction. "Oh no. Don't even think about it." The grin on the other woman's face was proof that the admonition was about twelve heartbeats too late.

"C'mon, just try one on. You can't be in Texas and not try on a cowboy hat."

"Sure I can." Though the black one looked interesting.

"Please ..." Jae cajoled, "Just one."

She caved and ducked her head, allowing the blonde to place the black demonstrator on her head. It was a little too big, but not by much.

Jae whistled. "Nice."

Reed tugged the elastic from her ponytail and let her hair cascade over her shoulders, then tipped the hat back a bit. "Why thankee, ma'am," she drawled.

"It's definitely you. Add a black duster and you could be a gunslinger

right out of the Wild West.”

Playing along, Reed ducked her head, curling the brim of the hat, then leaned back against the post assuming a posture she remembered from a movie poster. *Add a tooth pick, and it's perfect.*

“Add a stalk of hay, and it's perfect.” Jae's comment mirrored her own, bringing a slight smile to Reed's lips.

A lean, slightly bow-legged man in full western apparel sauntered over. “Take about ten minutes and I can fix you right up with one custom like.”

“Yes,” Jae answered without any input, then must have seen the look on Reed's face, because the director hastily added, “Consider it a gift for getting the tape laid.” Then she grinned. “Or a bribe.”

Recognizing the peace offering for what it was, Reed nodded her acceptance. In the past, gifts from directors had usually come with strings or as payment for services rendered. It was nice, she reflected, not to have to worry about that. “And to think, I had my heart set on a pair of Mickey Mouse ears.”

Jae burst out laughing. “Not that that isn't an interesting mental picture,” she finally managed before adding, “but somehow I see you more as a Josie West, than an Annette Funicello.”

This time she took the gentle teasing for what it was and laughed along with Jae. “Hey, I still have my Josie and Janie West dolls.”

Jae looked sheepish, “Me too, plus the Bionic Woman, though it seems her clothes have vanished.”

“Let me guess, the first thing you did was take them off so you could roll up the fake skin and operate on her bionic implants.” Reed handed a hat blank with the correct sized crown to the avidly listening hatter.

“Busted.” Jae moved to stand next to her and together they watched the man place the hat upside down in the pressing mold.

He punched the felt into the depression, then steamed the material, pushing and shaping it as he went. Every so often he would lift his head and look up at her, squinting, then cock his head to one side before going back to shaping the felt.

“Downward curve,” Jae interjected.

“I don't rightly know.” The hatter had stopped and was rubbing his chin speculatively.

“Trust me,” the blonde insisted, as she demonstrated with her hands what she wanted to see.

He continued to ponder the suggestion. Reed had had about all the sitting still and shopping she could take for one day, and there were still

three hours of flight to come. Dropping her voice to its lowest register, she played outlaw. “If the lady wants to see it down, curve it down. You got that?”

The alacrity with which he responded to her suggestion could have won him a gold medal if it had been an Olympic year. The final product looked like a cross between a drover’s hat and Indiana Jones’ battered fedora, but it worked. Jae had been right.

“You going to wear it out?”

“No,” Reed got in before Jae could say anything.

“Spoilsport.” The director gave her a mock glare and pulled her wallet out of her backpack, handing the salesman her Visa and signing the charge slip with a flourish while the man packed the hat, tying a string handle around the hat box.

“Tough to wear a hat in an airplane seat—even in business class,” Reed replied.

“Point.”

“Thanks.” She placed a hand on Jae’s lower back and steered her around a group of Japanese tourists. *Too late.* She didn’t understand a word they were saying, but her name came through loud and clear.

Her Japanese commercials had kept the medical bills at bay and put food on the table, so even though she would rather have escaped notice, she decided the easiest thing would be to sign as many of the books that were being waved at her as possible. Finally they escaped the throng, but only after she’d posed with the group for a photo op.

“That was different,” Jae commented as they neared their gate, where her other lead actress was being held under siege by a raucous crowd of teens. “Excuse me for a second.” The director headed off to the star’s rescue leaving Reed to hide behind a potted plant and a pillar. *Maybe I should have worn the hat after all.*

SIX

Four hours later, they each collected their bags from the revolving carrousel and Jae was quite relieved to discover that for the first time in living memory, her luggage had traveled the same flight plan she had. Outside, the weather seemed only slightly less cloying than inside, a breeze moving the air enough to provide a small measure of relief from the humidity. *A very small measure.* A smartly dressed Hispanic gentleman holding a sign with the name of the production company neatly stenciled across it was waiting patiently for them near the exit from the baggage claim.

“Over here,” Jae called to the others. Gratefully she sank into the leather interior and turned up the dial of the air conditioner. As expected, Reed climbed in next to her with Gwen McKittrick and Rachel Muniz taking up seats facing them.

“Wow.” Gwen was looking out the window, and Jae turned to see what had caught her attention.

The Magic Kingdom stretched in front of them, majestic arches rising up to greet new arrivals. They were staying inside the park at the same hotel used by the characters in the book. Jae wanted to try and give Reed and Gwen a sense of atmosphere and hopefully capture some of it on film. The filigreed Victorian structure was just coming into view. The afternoon sunlight reflected off the surface of the lake that stretched out in front of the hotel, adding to its elegant appearance.

Rachel added a low whistle. “Wow is right.” The monorail flashed by, its load of rapt passengers with faces pressed against the windows trying to drink in every visual they could.

Reed was trying very hard to look unimpressed, but the time they had spent in close quarters during the rest of the flight clued Jae in to the subtle, telltale signs that revealed the actress was just as excited as the rest of them. It was funny—a group of jaded Hollywood people in awe of an amusement park. *Disney magic*, she guessed. A blue eye winked lazily at her confirming her hunch, and Jae quirked her own brow back in silent acknowledgement.

The car came to a stop and the driver let them out. Leaving their bags to the nattily attired staff, Jae led the group up the stairs and into the hotel. Inside, friendly, efficient ladies completed their registration and wished them a pleasant stay in the Magic Kingdom, along with issuing an invitation to breakfast with Mickey and some other Disney favourites

while they were there.

“Will Winnie-the-Pooh be there?” Jae couldn’t help asking, quite unable to believe she actually had.

A low whisper sounded to her left as Reed spoke softly. “Interesting image, but somehow I picture you more as a Tigger.” The air brushed Jae’s ear tenderly, sending a pulse skittering along the nape of her neck.

“Touché.” Then she whispered back, “And that would make you whom? Eeyore?”

She and Reed had adjoining rooms on the left, overlooking the small lake in front, while the other two actresses were across the hall. “Meet for dinner in an hour?” Jae asked.

“Kewlege,” Gwen responded, showing her pleasure at being in Disney World.

Likewise, Rachel nodded assent before closing the door to her room behind her.

“What about you?” she asked Reed, hoping the actress wouldn’t retreat just because they were no longer alone.

“Count me in.” Then Reed vanished behind the hotel room door, leaving her and Gwen standing in the hall.

The blonde actress looked over at her. “About earlier, I’m sorry. It’s just, we’ve heard stories and stuff. I just figured you were too nice to let her be mean to,” Gwen explained, referring to the incident at the airport in Houston.

That put a different spin on Gwen’s earlier words, and Jae smiled. “To quote someone, ‘No harm, no foul.’ Okay?”

“Very okay. Later then.”

And then there were none. Jae laughed to herself as she entered her room. *Things are tough enough without you quoting from a murder mystery.* The stack of papers she removed from her briefcase reinforced her sense of how difficult things would be in the coming days. If Reed and Gwen didn’t gel as a team, then Jae would have wasted time and money—neither, of which she had to spare. Putting aside the interpersonal relationships of her cast, Jae separated the scenes they would be shooting in Orlando and began to outline the camera setups she wanted in each one.

* * *

Jae walked back through the throng leaving the theme park. Reed was to her left and the other two women were roaming ahead of them.

Maybe I should have cast Rachel as Dar. She certainly seems to get along with our 'Kerry' well enough. Reed had managed to get through an entire meal speaking only when spoken directly to, or when the waiter appeared.

As far as plans went, tonight's was misfiring horribly. Fireworks exploded in the sky above them and when she turned to address her companion, she was surprised to find her blue eyes wide with wonder, a small but delighted smile playing on her lips. Such a contradiction. *And admit it. That's exactly why you find her fascinating.*

"I love the way the silver stars look like giant weeping willows as they fall to the ground." Jae spoke softly, letting her own sense of wonder show in her voice.

Reed dipped her head in agreement. "I like the silver ones myself. Everything else seems so overdone."

They slowed their pace a little, craning their necks upwards to catch the last trails of fire as they descended earthward. By the time they reached the monorail that would take them back to the hotel, the crowd had all but vanished. Jae could see Reed visibly relax as the crowd around them thinned. Gwen and Rachel were no longer in sight, and she guessed that the two actresses had ditched them to find a bar or more congenial company.

The train opened its doors and they clambered aboard, Reed dropping into a front facing window seat. Jae slid in next to her and leaned her head back against a post, shutting her eyes against the glare of the overhead light. Finally the lights dimmed and the monorail pulled out of the station and began to wend its way through the park, dropping passengers at various hotels. Jae opened her eyes and glanced at Reed. "I always thought actresses talked more."

"Only the ones with nothing to say." Reed moved her body so that one shoulder was leaning against the window and she was facing Jae.

Jae mulled over the actress' observation, agreeing with the sentiment. "Would you like to go see Phantasmic tomorrow night?"

"Phantasmic?"

"Laser light show over the lake. It's timed to music and has some live action bits." She knew Reed liked fireworks. Hopefully this would interest her, draw her out a little. It didn't hurt that it would also be an opportunity to get to know the actress better before the pressures of filming swept over them. "Maybe we could even try out some of the rides for fun." This last was a dig at the fact that Reed was going to have to spend some time in various roller coasters filming scenes.

"Anything but Space Mountain." The train was nearing The Floridian. "Chicken?" Jae teased.

"Nope. Purist," came the retort as they exited the car.

"Purist, huh? Or afraid of the dark?" Reed's back stiffened, and Jae mentally slammed her head against the faux stone pillar they were passing. *What a walking minefield you are, Reed. Gotta learn not to do that.* Covering her lapse and pretending not to notice the other woman's reaction, Jae pointed at the hotel bar. "C'mon, I'll buy you a drink."

They took a back corner seat, just out of the path of patrons to the bar. For some reason it didn't surprise her in the slightest when Reed turned her chair so that she was facing most of the bar. A bouncy waitress approached them asking for their order, and Jae asked for a Beck's.

"Guinness, if you have it, Beck's if you don't." Reed placed her order and then looked at Jae questioningly. "What?"

"Dark beer?" Jae shuddered.

"Sure. That way it counts for two food groups."

"I'll take your word for that."

The waitress set their drinks down in front of them, and Jae had to admit that the tall glass of dark beer with its creamy head of beige foam looked appealing.

"Here." Reed slid her glass across the table and motioned for Jae to try some.

In the background the lounge singer had picked up her guitar and was tuning it, preparing, Jae guessed, for her last set. "My daddy always said, never drink a beer you can't see through."

"Chicken?"

"Nope. Purist."

"Purist, huh? Or afraid of the dark?" Reed sat smugly watching her, having neatly turned their earlier banter back on her.

Two could play at this game. Jae leaned forward running a finger through the condensation on the side of the glass. "Tell you what, I'll drink one of these—if you'll go on Space Mountain with me." She let the challenge fall on the table. Blue eyes flickered between the beer and her face and Jae arched a blonde brow, pushing the gauntlet a little harder.

"Deal, but you have to finish the whole pint." With that Reed neatly swapped their beers, taking Jae's Beck's.

"Deal," she confirmed, lifting the glass and touching it lightly against Reed's.

Two pints and an hour later the lights came up around them and Jae

stood from her chair, wobbling slightly from the combined effects of exhaustion and alcohol. A strong hand caught her waist and steadied her.

"I hope I'm in better shape after Space Mountain than you are right now," Reed drawled, steering her toward the elevator.

Jae shook her head in denial. "It wasn't the beer—that was surprisingly good."

"See, don't knock it 'til you've tried it. Ten million Irishmen can't be wrong," Reed said smugly.

"Hey, Cavanaugh is a *foine*, *foine* Irish name." Jae did her best imitation brogue, which was, admittedly, not very good.

"And if it wasn't the Guinness, what would it be then, lass?" The actress played along and spoke in a County Claire lilt.

"Late night and air travel. Does me in every time," she explained, then added with a smile, "Not that the beer helped any."

They had reached their floor and moved down the corridor. Jae opened her door and paused, reluctant to say goodnight. The stiffness of the early part of the evening had been more than made up for by the banter and light conversation they had shared in the bar, and Jae was afraid that if she ended the evening the sense of camaraderie they were developing would vanish with it.

Reed dug her own keycard out of her pocket and took a half step toward her room before pausing. "Tap on the inner door when you're ready for breakfast, I hear Pooh is gonna show." A last smile and she was gone, leaving Jae no chance to give an answer.

As she climbed into bed, Jae looked at the door adjoining their two suites. *Wonder if they still have that banana stuffed French toast on the menu.* As she drifted off to sleep, she tried to figure out which idea was making her happier: a sunrise breakfast with Pooh in Disney World, or a sunrise breakfast with Reed in Disney World.

Good thing she didn't have to choose.

* * *

"Reed!" A frantic pounding timed itself to the fists pounding in her dreams and for a second, Reed thought the nightmare was real, made manifest by virtue of having been dreamed vividly over the span of years.

"Reed! Are you okay? Reed?"

Heart pounding from the nightmare induced adrenaline, she took a

deep breath before swinging her feet onto the floor and standing. The air conditioner cut in again, its soft hum stealing the quiet from the room. Reed turned the bolt and opened the door that connected her room to the director's. A pale fist flashed in the dim lighting and connected with the side of her head. A sharp pain exploded in her temple, and Reed vaguely became aware of the rug rising to meet her.

"Reed?"

Reed opened her eyes at the sound of the worry in the younger woman's voice. "Is it breakfast time already?"

Her friend barked out a surprised laugh, "No. Not yet...."

Uncomfortable with discussing the reason Jae had most likely been pounding on her door, Reed tried to keep the discussion off of her nightmare. "That's good, because I'm pretty sure you are a little underdressed—even for Florida."

The blonde was clad in a pair of baggy boxers and the shirt she had been wearing earlier in the evening, though its unbuttoned and unwrinkled state suggested that Jae had probably only tossed it on minutes ago. A faint blush was just barely visible creeping up Jae's neck, reddening her face as she hastily fastened some buttons. "Yeah? Well in California, this is overdressed on most beaches."

"That would explain the lack of tan lines." This time it was her turn to blush as Reed realized what she'd said. Jae didn't appear to be offended and Reed propped herself up on one arm. "That's quite a right hook you've got."

A small palm snaked out and gently touched the side of Reed's head. "Kick-boxing. You sure you're okay?"

"Fine. And now I know what a knock up side the head feels like."

Jae laughed again, then they both stood up. The blonde gave her another concerned look, but didn't press the issue, for which Reed was grateful.

"You going to be able to go back to sleep?" Jae asked.

"No. I'll read or something. You?"

Jae shook her head. "No, I've had my allotted four hours for the day. It's my turn to read isn't it?"

Reed could have mentioned that since they were in a hotel room, it wouldn't be a problem to boot up the laptop and read from there, but the idea of being alone right now didn't appeal to her, and Reed was glad of the excuse to avoid being by herself.

When she didn't protest, Jae smiled. "I'll grab the book. Wonder if room service is awake?"

“Let’s find out.” Reed picked up the black phone on the desk and touched a combination of numbers, waiting for someone to answer. “What do you want?” She called back through the open door between their rooms.

“Steamed milk,” Jae answered as she came back into Reed’s room, having exchanged her shirt for a sweater. “With lots of honey.”

“All right, Pooh.” Reed ordered two and hung up the phone. Jae had crawled onto the king-sized bed and propped herself up with pillows. The extra blanket from the foot of the bed was tucked around her knees, and the book was already open.

“I think if my fondness for Hundred Acre Wood characters is going to get me saddled with a nickname, I’d like to opt for something other than Pooh.”

“That’s the funny thing about nicknames—you don’t get to pick.”

“Okay, Eeyore,” Jae teased, patting the bed.

Reed regarded her somewhat suspiciously for a minute, and decided that Jae was perfectly serious about referring to her as Eeyore if the Pooh name stuck. *Well, once in a while won’t kill me.*

There was lots of room for both of them on the bed so Reed stretched out next to Jae, stealing a corner of the blanket to cover her legs. “Just until room service shows,” she explained, after seeing Jae’s brow arched as if to say ‘mine’.

“Maybe we should wait before starting,” Jae suggested.

“Good idea.”

They must have been the only ones bugging room service in the middle of the night because, within minutes, a polite knock sounded on the door. Steamed milk in hand Reed returned to her side of the bed, licking some of the spilt froth off her finger.

“That’s my favourite part.”

“What is?”

“The froth.” Jae laughed and made shaking motions with the book. “I even shake milk cartons to make the milk all bubbly.”

“I’ll remember that next time I buy you coffee. One latte, hold the coffee,” she deadpanned, handing Jae her mug of steamed milk. She settled into the covers, and waited for Jae to begin to read. Eyes closed she listened to pages being thumbed through. *Most likely looking for the part where she fell asleep.* That had been a surprise, not that Jae had fallen asleep, but that she had managed to follow suit herself with the younger woman nestled on her shoulder.

There were a lot of things about her friendship with Jae that surprised

her. *What—besides the fact that she likes you?* Next to her, Jae began to read, her lilting voice describing the events of Global Volunteer day. Since she remembered that part, Reed continued to let her mind drift, enjoying the company.

How about the fact that she moves in and out of your personal space like it was an airport? Only one other person did that. *I can give him a call in the morning.* That was one advantage of being in Florida. It meant that she and her son were back in the same time zone, for a while at least.

She'd called Heidi from the restaurant earlier and Rio had been cleared to return to some schoolwork and light exercise, having successfully fought off the pneumonia. His heart had weathered the last infection, and he continued to gain weight, so plans for the valve replacement weren't going to be affected. That was probably a good part of the reason she was in a better mood after dinner than before it. *That, and the change in company.*

Reed couldn't help it. Being around Gwen made her nervous. It was one thing in a closed studio where everyone knew they were just acting, but what if someone got the wrong idea in public and the paparazzi started set romance rumours? *So the movie sells a few more tickets,* she wryly observed, all too aware of what drove box office in Hollywood. Big names. And if you couldn't get a big name, get a scandal.

Jae's voice cut in and out of her thoughts. Paint was applied to walls and dinner plans were made. She continued to drift along. Apparently, Kerry was singing to Dar.

"Half way up the stairs ... is a stair, where I sit ... there isn't any other stair ... quite ... like it. Half way up the stairs isn't at the bottom...."

Reed drifted back up through the haze for a few seconds. *Funny, I don't remember Kerry singing in the book.*

"... it isn't really anyplace it's someplace else instead...." The pillow cradled her head as, unrecognized, Jae's voice cradled her dreams.

* * *

The sheets rose and fell in time to the gentle exhalations of the woman nestled within the cotton confines. Dark hair splayed over a plump pillow, partially obscuring the high cheekbones and sun-kissed skin. One hand was wedged under the pillow, cradling the head that rested on its surface, while the other was resting on Reed's side, fingers hanging loosely.

"... it isn't really anyplace ... it's someplace else instead." Jae let the

words fade out. Reed had dropped off into sleep, the words of the ancient children's song doing for the exhausted actress what it had done for her own little sister when they were kids. *I can't believe I just did that.* She'd noticed Reed's eyes fluttering as sleep tried to claim her, and on impulse Jae had shifted from reading to singing the soothing Pooh song.

So now what? Did she go back to her own room and bed? Or did she stay put, in case her movement woke Reed? Waking Reed was something she was loath to do, and the actress had pinned the covers under one leg, which would make it difficult, if not impossible for Jae to slip from under the sheets at the moment.

Reed shifted, a lock of hair falling away from a high cheekbone, the faint purpling of a small bruise beginning to show. The director winced. *I can't believe I did that. I can just see Hard Copy now—Director Pummels Actress.* Well at least Reed realized it had been an accident.

Jae wondered whether or not Reed realized how chilling her scream had been. *What haunts you so?* Her friend tossed fitfully again, and Jae ran a soothing hand over the other woman's brow, then stopped, aware of what she was doing. *Speaking of Hard Copy.* Whether or not she should have touched Reed, the actress responded to Jae's gentle caress and seemed to sink back into restful slumber.

The strong angularity of Reed's usual expression had melted under Morpheus' touch, blending the features to a soft innocence which Jae found intriguing. It was as though the stoicism she showed the rest of the world was a mask, tightly controlled and rigidly presented, designed to hold unknown hurt at bay. Reed had let the mask slip a little around her, allowing Jae to see for the first time just how beautiful Reed was—not Reed playing someone else—but the actress herself.

Not wanting to take advantage of Reed's vulnerable state, Jae pulled her hand away, and leaned back against the pillows she had originally propped behind her back. *You need to be very, very careful, Jae m'grrl. This is not a woman to be falling for.*

That was going to be a problem. Should she tell Reed? Or was it really not important? They were just friends, and Reed was as safe from her as a child would be. Jae laughed to herself remembering a college friend, Kimberley.

They had been curled up in Kim's bed after a late party, Jae too drunk to drive home. Talking and chatting, the conversation had turned to relationships and Kim had asked her if she had anyone special. "Yes," she'd answered. Kim's eyes had lit up in excited anticipation of hearing some juicy

details and asked who it was.

Jae and Kim had been friends since freshman year, and Jae didn't want to lie, so she steeled herself against the possible rejection and answered, "Corrina."

"Corrina?" she'd repeated, then Kim had moved as far over on the bed as she could.

"Kim ... I'm not..." She had been at a loss for words. "It's not contagious you know."

"Huh?"

"Being gay—it's not contagious. And you're going to fall off the bed if you get much further over there."

Kim had crept a little closer, pulling a pillow into her lap as she did. "How long?"

"Always, I guess. So if it were contagious, you'd have caught it already." She'd shrugged and Kimberley had laughed, breaking the tension.

"So, like, every time you slept over ... or we went to the gym?"

"Was I checking you out?"

Kim had blushed.

"No."

Dark eyes looked at her skeptically. "Really?"

"Really."

"Why not?"

That had floored her, and Jae remembered just sitting there for what seemed like an eternity before answering. "Would you believe, you're not my type?"

Kimberley had burst into tears, leaving Jae thoroughly confused. She had moved across the bed on her knees and let Kim cry it out on her shoulder, the way she had for the previous four years of school, life and man troubles. The sniffing and sobs finally subsided and Jae looked into Kim's dark eyes, the rims red from her tears. "What was that all about?"

And they had had a long heart to heart about the difference between friends and lovers, Jae admitting to having had more than her fair share of the latter over the previous few years, but no real relationships. "Lovers," she'd said, "come and go, friends are forever."

It had been funny really, Kim going from being upset that she was gay to being equally upset that she couldn't even get a lesbian to fall for her. Two years later, Jae had gone to her wedding, reluctantly squeezing into a dress in order to stand as a bridesmaid, and then, nine months later, attending the christening.

Somehow Jae doubted she'd get the same reception from Reed. Some things just had to be on a need-to-know basis, and right now the actress didn't need to know. Reed rolled over, burrowing deeper into the pillow, releasing the sheets that had been pinned under her leg.

Jae eased herself out of the bed and padded across the thick carpet, enjoying the feel of the pile against her bare feet. At the door she paused, taking a last second to drink in the unguarded form of the woman sprawled on the bed, feeling privileged that Reed had trusted her and allowed the intimacy into their developing friendship. She left the door between the two rooms open. *Just in case*, she told herself. *Unh huh, you keep telling yourself that, and you just might believe it.*

SEVEN

Two women—one tall with sandy brown hair, the other with dark brown hair and what looked to be a green belt pouch—were making their way through the lobby to where Reed sat with Jae and Rachel. Gwen had gone off to explore the park some more, hoping, she'd said, to get over that little thing she had about roller coasters.

Reed didn't move, though she recognized the taller of the two from pictures, as being Holly Wulfenden, the author of *Tropical Storm*. The coffee in her cup swirled clockwise around the circumference as she rotated it in one hand, scrutinizing the moving contents rather than staring at the new arrivals.

"Reed, Rachel, I'd like you to meet Holly Wulfenden and ..." Jae gestured at the shorter of the two.

"Maribel Lunato," the other woman supplied, shaking Jae's hand warmly. Reed wondered who she was and what she was doing there.

Jae looked over at her imploringly and Reed stood, cordially greeting both women before sitting again. The two new arrivals were apparently going to join them during their filming time in Disney, and then Holly would accompany the cast back to Los Angeles, before they returned to Miami to complete filming.

Which didn't really make a whole lot of sense. She would have thought they would film all the Florida stuff in one go, rather than split the filming. But then, she wasn't the director and didn't need to understand. Most likely, it was an artifact from the change in directors. Reed caught the waiter's eye and indicated that he should refill the director's cup along with her own. Stretching across the table to retrieve the cream, Reed caught the writer studying her speculatively.

"Something I can help you with?" she drawled, meeting Holly's amber eyes. Jae looked up, a worried frown on her face, and Reed resisted the impulse to bait the author. "If not, then could you please pass the cream?" she finished, trying to sound a little less antagonistic.

Holly's eyes flickered between Reed and Jae, then she passed the small porcelain jug of cream, placing it on the table next to Reed's coffee cup.

"Thank you," she acknowledged and Jae gave her a quick smile then returned her attention to the script and Rachel. An awkward silence descended over the table and Reed was surprised to find that she wanted to break it. What exactly did you talk to a lesbian about

anyway?

Over the rim of her coffee cup, she took a close look at the woman who had written *Tropical Storm* and decided that it wouldn't kill her to actually talk to the woman. She really was enjoying the book the movie was based on, and had some questions about it.

Most people wrote her off as aloof. The rest assumed that because she was both beautiful, at least by current standards, and an actress, that her brains were lacking. They would have been surprised to find she had been well on her way to a degree in English from Georgetown, until circumstances had turned her attentions elsewhere.

"She likes Pooh, too." Reed pointed at Jae. It wasn't the best opening line in a conversation, but she was out of practice, and it would have to do.

Holly looked down at her overalls, where an embroidered Winnie-the-Pooh sat among bright flowers and the ubiquitous honey pot, and chuckled.

Maribel giggled. "She actually looked everywhere for Tigger ones, but they were all out."

"She tells me I'm more Tigger than Pooh, too," Jae chimed in, joining the discussion. "And something tells me she's not an Eeyore like I first thought, more a Roo."

"Right. A six foot Roo. Can you imagine how big Kanga would need to be?" Rachel added, then smiled, surprising Reed.

For an instant, she wanted to put the supporting actress in her place, then thought better of it. In fact, maybe she'd been approaching this film all wrong. From the moment Jae had taken over, things had felt different, less Hollywood. Reed smiled back at Rachel, accepting the overture.

The conversation continued to flow around her, and she learned that Holly was using vacation time from her regular job as a systems administrator in order to participate in the filming being done in Orlando and Los Angeles, then would return to Miami and pull double duty for the remainder of filming; while for Maribel, a librarian and reviewer, this was a vacation.

"So you work for the company you wrote about?" Reed was curious, a minor in computer science had rounded out her degree program, and the technical end of computers fascinated her.

"Not exactly, I work for SBS. It was a running joke, though, among some of the first people to read the book that I worked for a company called not-SBS. I never got around to coming up with a name for it until

after it went to be published.” Holly laughed again, a low pleasant sound whose vibrancy told you that this was a woman genuinely in love with life and where she was in it. “Names were never really a strong suit.”

“She’s not kidding,” Maribel corroborated, before continuing. “Main characters would change names between updates. Sometimes we thought she did it on purpose, just to see if the pups were paying attention.”

“Pups?” Jae asked.

“Her on-line fans,” Maribel clarified.

“Can I ask you something?” Reed looked at Holly, who shrugged as if to say, go ahead. “Why is the print edition different from the one on the web?”

“Basically, length. Print houses have different limitations than web publishing does. I had to edit it for length, then I had to edit it even more when the script was first optioned.” Holly reached for her iced coffee. “You’ve read the on-line version?”

Reed nodded. “Had an accident with the print copy, but your name came up in a search engine. So I downloaded it.”

“That would make you a pup then,” Jae teased, stealing a corner of the chocolate croissant that was resting on Reed’s plate.

She thought about that. While downloading *Tropical Storm*, she had also saved the three sequels and some other stuff. She was enjoying the story, and the orientation of the characters was fast becoming irrelevant. Well, except for the fact that eventually she was going to have to film some of the romantic scenes herself.

There was a poignancy to the way that Holly wrote which fully engaged one in the daily lives of her characters. Reed had to admit that although she knew how the story ended—having read several versions of the script—she was looking forward to reading the way Holly resolved the events in the book.

The actress looked over at Holly, then at Jae, and crossed her arms over her chest before leaning back in her chair. “Yeah, Tigger. I guess it does.”

A couple of hours and a quarter of the Magic Kingdom later, they were standing in line waiting to ride the boats through the It’s A Small World ride. Jae had insisted that they couldn’t consider that they had properly done Disney until riding it. The sun was beating down on them, and if for no other reason than to get out of the sun, Reed had agreed to go. Gwen and Rachel were just ahead of them in the line and Holly had

slipped off, Maribel in tow, promising to be back before they got to the ride.

"You really need to stop looking at her like that," Jae whispered into her ear.

Reed turned around, startled. "Who?"

"Gwen. You keep looking at her like she is going to bite you or turn into some sort of mythical beast."

"I'm not."

"Reed, you look at her and your brow crinkles right here." Jae reached up and touched the place in question.

"Oh." She couldn't help it. Tomorrow they would begin filming in earnest, and that meant it was time to begin performing.

"You should talk to her," Jae suggested.

"About what?"

Jae leaned against the rail, the cotton of her shirt stretching over her shoulders as she laid her arms along its length, one hand coming to rest behind the actress. "Gwen had to go through the same thing, when she filmed *Callous Plans*. Heard she was pretty hinky about kissing Ruth Everson."

"Yeah?" Reed leaned back next to Jae, letting her weight rest on the wooden rail, one arm across her chest, the other holding her chin in her right hand, rubbing the sides of her jaw. *Is this as weird for McKitrick as it is for me?*

"And I hate to put too fine a point on it, but part of the rationale behind coming here was to get you two comfortable with each other. You haven't been within five feet of her."

"I was in the elevator."

"That is not what I meant." Jae looked at her over the rim of her sunglasses, an amused twinkle in the blue-green eyes.

Reed took a second look. *Her eyes change colour*. Before they could discuss it further Holly and Maribel returned, each laden with huge cones of ice cream.

"Yo, Reed." Holly handed over a dark waffle cone stuffed with what looked to be three scoops of vanilla ice cream.

Flecks of brown speckled the surface nestled in and among the ancient ivory coloured cream. The brown bits were pieces of vanilla bean and swirls of nutmeg, and Reed smiled appreciatively at her benefactor. This was almost enough to make up for the fact that they had been listening to that stupid song for over half an hour now. "Thanks."

I am so going to pay for this. Well the hotel has a gym, and maybe a good

workout will help me sleep.

Jae had been gone when she'd woken up, and the younger woman hadn't mentioned the nightmare or the bruise that the actress had had to hide under a layer of foundation. The only sign that the night hadn't progressed as planned had been the open door between their rooms.

She glanced over at Jae who was eagerly attacking what looked to be a pistachio, chocolate and, *my gods, is that strawberry*, cone. Reed wasn't sure she wanted to see what combination of flavours everyone else had gotten. Though, she smiled to herself, Jae's ice cream was as quirky as the director.

Gwen looked at her cone, then at the one in Reed's hand, then over at Jae's, before looking back down at her own completely strawberry one. "Please tell me that you didn't do this by personality?"

Holly chuckled, sucking at her own cone. "Yep. Ice cream is kinda like that."

Reed looked at the cone in Holly's hand and lifted a dark brow. "Really?" The author had three scoops of double-chocolate fudge chunk ice cream balanced precariously in a chocolate dipped waffle cone.

"You are so busted, Hol," Maribel grinned evilly, taking a swipe at the melted cream escaping down the side of her chocolate mint cone.

"Alright, ladies, if you want to step this way." A young boy, who didn't look quite old enough to have to worry about Disney's facial hair policy, led them to the boats that would carry them through the infamous attraction.

Jae looked at her and lifted both blonde brows in a silent question.

"You owe me," Reed muttered dropping into a seat next to Gwen, leaving Jae to ride with Rachel.

"Big time," Jae happily agreed, munching the remains of her cone.

* * *

Not much later, Jae settled back into her seat, enjoying the slight bobbing of the boat and the trickling noise of the water as it ran through the exhibit. In front of her, Reed was trying to get comfortable on the hard plastic and stealing surreptitious looks at her co-star. She nearly laughed when the actress raised a hand up to her brow and checked for the telltale crinkle. Reed was so damned cute when she was trying to behave. *Freeze. Ixnay on the utecay.*

She looked up from watching Reed to find Holly looking back at her knowingly, and unaccountably Jae blushed. But the author's gaze

remained friendly, so she offered a smile in return. *A woman with her gaydar in full operation.* The director turned her attention back to the miniature children moving around the landscape of what could only be someone's nightmare. Every musical bone in her body cringed, as the refrain echoed one more time through the chamber. Even changing the language didn't help.

Some of the figures spun close to the boat, and she wondered if any one had ever decapitated one out of some primal instinct to save their sanity.

"You owe me two," Reed mouthed, pointing at the dancing dolls kicking their mechanical legs into the air. Before she could think of anything to say, Gwen said something and Reed turned to answer her. Judging by the hand gestures it had something to do with the animatronics.

Well that was something anyway. If nothing else Reed and Gwen were talking to one another, so the ride wasn't a total bust. After what seemed like forever, but was only the regulation time, they floated out of the caverns and back into daylight.

When she scrambled out of the swan shaped boat, it was to find five women all staring at her, identical looks of suffering on their faces. "What?"

"You're so fired," Reed announced. "Holly is the new bus driver."

"Because no way, no how are you getting us into Imagination Land or whatever it's called." Gwen tugged her blonde ponytail through the back of her baseball cap and settled it onto her head. "I'd rather ride a roller coaster."

"That can be arranged," Jae quipped back. Off to the side, a flash caught her eye. *Oh cripes, just what Reed and Gwen need, someone chasing them around the park taking pictures.* Protectively, she moved between the two actresses and the short photographer.

Jae had noticed the same woman earlier, and had admired the wolf pup on her sweatshirt. Thinking nothing of it, she had chalked it up to coincidence that the woman was in the same vicinity as they were most of the morning. Now the director wasn't so sure.

"Well if you want to do a roller coaster, how about heading for Frontier Land?" Holly suggested.

"Sounds good," Jae agreed. "That's the one with Brer Rabbit right?"

"And the fifty foot drop," Gwen added, just barely loud enough to be heard.

They were winding their way through the crowds, leaving Mattel's

ride-gone-awry behind them. Jae stopped to finger the soft fleece of an embroidered vest. Glancing at the shop's window, a familiar reflection caught her eye. The female photographer from earlier was no longer alone; she appeared to have a small pack of friends clustered around her. *Maybe it was just a coincidence after all.*

"What do you keep looking at?" Reed leaned over her shoulder and Jae caught the bare hint of sandalwood that she remembered from the plane.

Should I tell her? The woman and her friends appeared to be watching them again, and Jae decided that it was no coincidence. "I think you and Gwen have been spotted." She nudged her head in the group's direction, pointing them out to Reed.

Reed looked at them, most likely evaluating what kind of threat they represented. "You know," she drawled, "they don't appear to have noticed me and Gwen at all. But you, they keep pointing at."

"Take off your hat," Reed said.

Jae complied, looking at Reed in confusion. The actress still had all her hair pulled up inside a baseball cap, and a dark pair of Ray Bans rested on the bridge of her nose, all but obscuring her identity. The group of photographers had drifted a little closer and was excitedly snapping pictures of them.

"See. I told you they were real."

"But how come she has short hair?"

"Is that really them?"

"Can't be. She's too tall."

"Yeah and look, she's got a tattoo."

Jae looked down at the Celtic knot-interlace running around her left bicep. *Why on earth does it matter that I have a tattoo?*

"Ooo look ... isn't that...."

Jae braced herself for the onslaught, and next to her Reed tensed.

"Excuse me," the first lady that Jae had noticed addressed them, "but is that really Holly Wulfenden?"

Jae's jaw dropped and Reed began to chuckle. "As a matter of fact it is," the actress helpfully supplied.

"Oh cool." The young woman started taking pictures, her finger clicking rapidly on the shutter.

"You might want to try it this way." Reed reached over and tugged the lens cap from the lens.

"Oh wow." She pocketed the cap that the actress had handed her and turned to her mates. "See, I told you they were real. Dar just fixed my

camera.”

Reed just quirked an expressive eyebrow. “Yo, Holly.”

The author turned around, breaking off the discussion she had been having with Maribel, Gwen and Rachel. “Yo, Reed,” she answered, continuing the running joke that seemed to have sprung up between them.

“I think these are yours.” Reed pointed out the photographers. “They’re internet pups.”

“Can we have a group shot?” the apparent leader of the pack, a woman in her mid to late thirties sporting a penguin tattoo, asked Holly.

Jae watched in quiet fascination as the author accommodated the group, posing for pictures, first alone, then with Maribel, who as a reviewer of some note, drew nearly as big a reaction from the group as Holly had. The unnerving part was that every time they thought the director wasn’t looking, they would be studying her.

Reed had taken the opportunity to fade into the background a bit, and Jae marveled that so tall and magnetic a personality could just melt from view if she chose.

“Okay, now you with Dar and Kerry.” Ten cameras suddenly came to the fore, two in the hands of a woman wearing a sweatshirt that said ‘Sydney 2000 or Bust.’

Gwen gamely stepped forward, a bemused smile on her face. No doubt having done a successful television show for four years, she was used to being confused with her character.

Reed had moved up behind Jae, and leaned down to whisper in an ear, “Looks like I get closer than five feet, hunh?”

“Mmm, looks like.” Jae fought the desire to lean back into Reed as the taller woman continued to hover just behind her apparently hesitating slightly about whether or not to pose.

“Perfect.” A flash went off, then another.

Jae blinked against the sudden barrage, confused. *What in the name of Father Peter was that about?* More flashes went off and it struck her. *They think I’m Kerry.* “Guys, wrong person. She plays Kerry, not me.”

One of the taller women smacked the shorter one on the shoulder teasingly. “You and your ‘see they’re real.’”

The group wandered off, tucking their camera equipment away. “Shame, they looked kinda cute together.”

Jae hastily looked at Reed to see if she had caught the offhand remark, but the actress was focused on some anecdote that Maribel was relating. She looked over at Holly. “That happen to you a lot?”

“Sometimes. The merpups are really sweet, and fun, so I don’t mind.” A spark of mischief appeared in the dark eyes. “And they’re right—the two of you do look cute together.”

For the second time in as many hours, Jae felt her cheeks go bright red.

* * *

Engrossed, Jae had lost track of time, and didn’t realize at first that she had been found until a familiar silhouette darkened the sketchbook.

“What are you doing?” Reed leaned over her, moving out of the light, and rested one hand loosely on Jae’s shoulder.

“Storyboard.” Jae continued to sketch bold lines across the page, wanting to capture the way the shadows fell over the ride in the waning light. She’d played most of the day, and there were some things she needed to finish before dark. When the director of photography arrived tomorrow, Jae wanted to have roughed out most of the storyboard in preparation for refining the shooting script.

If they could take advantage of some of the natural lighting, that would reduce the amount of setting up they would have to do for the daylight shots, and that was important because they had only been given two small windows of time on each ride with which to work. Everything else would need to be shot during the night under full lighting and, if possible, that was something she’d rather get done in one night.

Reed settled companionably next to her on the wooden bench, quietly watching her sketch the mountain. Jae finished that and roughed out a series of small action scenes indicating at which points on the ride she wanted the cameras to switch vantage points. Increasing the tape speed, they would run the cameras on the ride several times to capture as many details as they could. Then, by slowing the tape down, they would be able to show the audience a clear picture of the ride in more detail than if they had actually ridden it themselves.

The key would be to draw the audience into what Dar and Kerry were doing, involve them in the lives of the characters before springing the romance on them. The side plot with Rachel Muniz’s character, Michelle Graver, would unite the audience temporarily and give them something to root against—unwittingly joining emotional forces with the protagonists. That was tough to do in a two-hour film, and tricks of action—like the roller coaster—provided a shortcut. The storm would be

another. Storms tapped into the collective subconscious, and she would use the one on Fisher Island to mirror both tension and attraction.

“Sorry to bother you. I just needed to know what time we’ll break for dinner tomorrow ... roughly?” Reed was holding one fine boned hand over the mouthpiece of her cell phone.

Jae had been so absorbed in the storyboarding that she hadn’t even noticed Reed talking on the phone. Mentally she went over what she wanted to accomplish and estimated the time that Reed would have between finishing one set of shots and when the cameras would be allowed to roll on the rides. “Probably around seven. Most of our shooting tomorrow night will be after the park closes.” One merciful advantage of using Space Mountain: it was dark twenty-four hours a day.

“Thanks.” The actress shifted around slightly, her back to Jae.

She wasn’t trying to listen in on Reed’s conversation, but even over the din of the happiest place on earth she couldn’t help but overhear some words.

“Love you too. Right, around seven thirty. Bye.” The antenna was pushed back into the body of the phone, and the slim plastic device was slipped into the front pouch of Reed’s brown backpack.

Not wanting to be caught staring, Jae quickly returned her attention to the sketchpad, turning to a crisp, clean sheet. She twirled the drafting pencil in the sharpener, twisting it around until the point was beyond sharp. Of course, Reed had someone, which was for the best. Right? So why did she feel a twinge of disappointment? Probably for the same reason that she had just unwittingly drawn Reed’s eyes. Hastily she turned the page.

“Where’d everyone else get off to?” Jae broke the silence.

“Holly said something about needing a mask of some sort, with feathers, some shrunken heads and something about mouse ears. Gwen conned Rachel into another trip down Splash Mountain.”

They both laughed. Once she had actually tried the ride, Gwen had loved it. Their Disney liaison had finally caught up with them, providing the extra pass for Maribel and apologizing for not giving it to them earlier. Which meant no more waiting in line. Jae had refused to let the group use the special passes until they all had them. “What’s that, her fourth trip?”

“Sixth,” Reed deadpanned. “Maribel headed that-a-way.”

Jae looked over where the actress had pointed and could see the librarian cum reviewer snapping photos of Simba. She wondered if the

woman realized that the group from earlier was taking pictures of her taking pictures. Her ears pinked as the memory of the pack's parting observation flitted through her mind.

"Get too much sun?"

"Unh ... no ... yes ..." she stammered, further embarrassed.

"Which is it?" Humour swam in the actress' eyes.

"Yes. Which I think makes for a good excuse to break for dinner."

"Break? As in, take a temporary respite from an activity?"

"Precisely," Jae grinned back, a wicked gleam of her own lighting her eyes. "You owe me a trip down Space Mountain, remember?"

"Not the type of thing I'd forget. But I was thinking, I really should do some prep work for tomorrow."

"It is prep work, and if you want I can always help you rehearse, later."

Reed looked slightly panic-stricken, then relaxed. "No way out is there?"

"No way but down. Two-hundred and seventy-five feet." Jae laughed. She couldn't help it. The sudden look of terror that crossed Reed's face was priceless. "Don't worry, I'll hang on tight. You won't fall out." She laughed even harder as Reed's expression shifted to narrow-eyed revenge mode, nearly missing Reed's rejoinder.

"Paybacks are a bitch."

Jae pressed her advantage, sensing that she wouldn't often have one. "The real question is ... do you want to eat before or after?"

Reed looked over at her and drawled, "Oh, I think before. Definitely before."

That sobered her up. "You were just kidding, right—on the plane—about you getting motion sickness?"

Without batting an eyelash, Reed responded, "The question you gotta ask yourself is this: do ya feel lucky?"

EIGHT

"I'm taller."

"So? I promised not to let go of you—not the other way around."

"I'll squish you." Reed knew she was clutching at straws, and looking at the director she could see that it was all Jae could do not to giggle. The actress stood like a recalcitrant child, her arms folded defiantly across her chest, feet set shoulder width apart.

The ride attendant coughed politely. Their VIP passes had bought them a measure of indulgence, but the ride had a schedule to maintain. "Would you like to wait for the next go around?" He finished locking the bar of the passengers in the second seat and looked at them expectantly.

"No, let's get this over with."

"Reed, stop." Jae held out a hand and held the older woman back, waving the next passengers to board ahead of them. "We'll take the next one."

"What?" Reed barked.

Jae flinched. "This is supposed to be fun. I'm sorry if I pressured you into something you hate," she said regretfully, her tone low, the words coming slowly.

The actress' demeanor changed instantly. Reed let her shoulders drop and she looked down at her shoes, scuffing one back and forth on the concrete loading platform. The noisy din of excited tourists and the awed screams of keyed up children faded into the background as she tried to think of what to say. She wanted to pull the sharp words back. The look of hurt that had flashed over Jae's eyes had torn straight through her.

The next black coaster train disgorged its load of passengers, and still she hadn't figured out what to say. Jae gave a sad smile and turned away, making for the turnstile.

"Jae, wait," She swallowed, the words not coming. Instead she stepped over the edge of the car and slid into the front space, leaning forward to allow Jae to sit in behind her. It was hard, trusting her fears to someone she hardly knew, who hardly knew her. And still, another part of her craved the contact, wanting, for once, not to have to be strong, to let another human being touch her, protect her.

The director leaned over and laid a hand gently on Reed's shoulder, concern radiating through the warm skin of Jae's soft palm. The

tentative brush became more confident as Reed didn't pull back, turning instead to meet the eyes of her friend. Even in the half-light of the attraction, the blonde's eyes were luminous, and held hers for a long moment before their owner nodded and eased in behind her. The younger woman wedged her legs against the side of the car, careful not to kick her companion as she settled into position. Strong fingers crept around Reed's waist and pulled her back against Jae's surprisingly muscular body. The director then leaned forward, resting her chin on Reed's shoulder, and the actress fought back the urge to pull away. "I've got you. I promise," Jae breathed more than whispered.

The ride started, dropping suddenly before she could pull away, gravity forcing her to either fight to separate their bodies, or just accept the quietly reassuring and comforting presence for what it was. They rounded another curve and the rushing air swept the tantalizing scent of vanilla into her nostrils. As Jae leaned forward, balancing the two of them against the sudden shock of another sheer drop, Reed realized the perfume was Jae's.

Another sharp drop threw her toward the side of the car, but before she could hit the metal walls, Jae's arms tightened around her and the blonde absorbed the impact, a soft groan barely audible over the rushing of metal wheels over the track. They descended into the pitch black, and Reed squeezed her eyes shut.

A sense of vertigo replaced the slight safety Jae's grip was providing, so she flung her eyelids open again just as a bright red and white pinwheel loomed at her from the left. Reed flinched away from it, and Jae wrapped her in strong arms. "Easy, Roo. I've got you."

And Reed knew she did. Another twist threw her in the opposite direction from that which the car was travelling in, and this time she relaxed into Jae's powerful embrace and gave herself up to the unexpected safety she found there.

Jae felt Reed relax in her arms, and reflexively tightened her hold, wanting to be worthy of the trust being placed in her. Soft raven hair tickled her nose and she slid her cheek against Reed's head, inhaling the warm scent of cotton mingled with sandalwood. *What haunts you so my friend? Who has hurt you so badly that it reaches across time and binds you in chains still? What is it that lives in your nightmares and steals your sleep?* She shook her head a little and smiled wryly at her own inner response. *And why exactly, m'grrl, do you wish you could spend five minutes alone in the ring with whoever it was?*

Her muscles ached from the effort of keeping the two of them from

bouncing around the car, the strain making itself felt between her shoulder blades. Jae rolled her arms slightly to alleviate the pressure and Reed nestled in deeper, the actress' body melding to hers. The blonde let her frame curl around the longer one of the actress, and they began to move in sync with the ride now that Reed was no longer fighting it, or her. With guilty pleasure she gave herself permission to enjoy the weight of the woman in her arms. In the middle of the wildest ride in the busiest theme park in the world, Jae found a sense of peace wrap around her—one that she usually only found alone on a wave pummeled beach.

She savoured it for a long moment until a stifled gasp from Reed turned her mind back to the roller coaster. The actress had actually given a slightly hysterical laugh at the end of the last curve and drop combination. They rounded the last bend and Jae leaned back, aware that Reed would probably prefer not to be seen cuddling with a woman. Casually she let her hands drop to Reed's waist, lightly holding the sides of the white cotton shirt in her hands.

The car screeched to a halt, metal atoms evaporating under the immense pressure of the wheels. Reed didn't make a motion to get up, and Jae tried to keep her smile a secret, but the ride attendant caught her eye and Jae had to lift one hand quickly over her mouth.

"Jae?"

"Umm?"

"I think I need one more rehearsal, just to make sure."

"Right. I did say I'd help you rehearse." Jae winked at the ride operator. "Once more round the block if you don't mind, Jeeves."

Three rides later they were giggling like schoolgirls trying unsuccessfully to regain their balance. Finally they found their way out of the crowded ride and into the densely packed park.

"I need to sit on something that isn't moving," Jae admitted, laughing.

"What about that Phantasmic thing you mentioned?"

Jae shook her head. "That's Disney Land, I checked earlier. Here it's something called IllumiNations, over at Epcot."

"Oh." Reed sounded disappointed, so Jae thought for a minute.

"C'mon." She took Reed's hand, weaving along through the crowd, and it was only when she caught sight of their reflection in a shop window that she realized that she was still pulling the actress along, hand in hand. Pretending to shift her backpack, she dropped Reed's hand, her own feeling cold and empty for the loss of warmth.

"Where are you hauling me off to now...." Reed's voice trailed off as

she spotted the large, ornate carousel. Detailed wooden horses moved gracefully along the mirrored plains, a sea of motion on a bed of colour.

“Cool, hunh?”

“Oh yeah,” the actress agreed, wonder filling her tone.

They filed onto the platform looking for riderless mounts, both coming to a stop before a beautiful buff coloured mare. “Go ahead.” Jae watched Reed’s blue eyes widen, becoming almost violet in her excitement. “You ride her.” When she turned to find a horse of her own, they had all been taken. Only a chariot on the far side remained empty. Jae reached to take hold of the pole in front of her, content to ride standing.

“Hey, Tiger.” Reed was holding a hand out to her, eyebrow raised in invitation.

Jae smiled and met Reed’s eyes. Sometime during the wild roller coaster ride, their relationship had changed imperceptibly; by the time they had finished, she no longer pulled away from Reed the moment the ride began to shudder to a stop. She took the proffered hand, surprised at the effortless way Reed lifted her into the saddle. The blonde leaned back slightly, nestling into the hollow formed by Reed’s arms when the actress reached for the leather reins.

The motion of the horse on the pole felt old and new and right, the presence of the woman behind her a part of that feeling. The music twinkled its agreement, and fireworks over the Plaza of Nations punctuated the night like the hoof beats of a horse.

The ride came to a gradual halt and the world settled back into reality as the magic ride ended. The same warm smell of vanilla and cotton that Reed remembered from the roller coaster hung in the air. It had been a long time since she had let someone other than Rio this close, even Heidi was careful about invading her space, but Jae, Jae moved in it as though she belonged there. Reluctantly she let go of the younger woman. The sensation of Jae tucked against her lingered, ghost-like, long moments past the parting of their bodies, and for an instant Reed wished the ride had been just a little longer. Confused, the actress swung down from the saddle, letting Jae balance a hand on her shoulder as the director hopped off in turn.

“Hungry?” Jae inquired, as she tugged a strap on her pack tight.

“A little.” They had been munching off and on for most of the day, sampling various tempting treats and exotic confections. They made their way out of the ride compound and turned along Main Street in search of something edible.

“How can you eat another one of those?”

Reed looked up from the line of red she was carefully painting down the center of the Pluto Dog. “Easy. Just like this.” She took a large bite, rolling her eyes and patting her stomach in exaggerated enjoyment.

They were wandering back through the park, heading for the monorail station. Both still had a lot of work to do before tomorrow and had decided to call it an early night.

The wooden saloon style doors of The Emporium creaked in the evening breeze.

Jae had heard them too and made a beeline for the shop. Reed groaned. She was all Mickied out. If she saw that inane silhouette one more time, she was going to go postal all over someone. Reluctantly she followed the younger woman inside the crowded store, stepping around a pack of last minute shoppers.

A rack caught her eye and she smiled to herself when she saw the variety of characters embroidered on the cotton. Jae had vanished, and Reed took the opportunity to edge over to a till. The experienced saleslady recognized the signs of a customer buying a gift and removed the boxers from sight. “Thanks,” she said, taking another look around for Jae.

“Are you sure about the size?”

She paused and thought. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Your husband will love these, lots of wives buy them.” The wrapped package was set back on the counter. “That will be twenty-one thirty please.”

Reed swung her pack off her shoulder, and took out her wallet.

A warm hand brushed against her waist as Jae came up behind her. “What’d you get?”

“If I told, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise, now would it?” She handed the clerk three tens and tucked the package into her bag. “You can have it after we get back to the hotel.”

“Tease.” The director moved off to look at a collection of porcelain miniatures.

“Here’s your change.” The sales woman brusquely handed her a few coins along with a five and some ones, no longer friendly.

Puzzled, the actress put the bills into her wallet and pocketed the change. “Thank you.” When she looked back up, the disgust on the clerk’s face floored her. “What is your problem?” she growled.

“You, and your kind.” The saleslady turned on her heel and moved to serve another patron.

"My kind?" Then it hit her. The clerk assumed that she and Jae were ... together. *Had everyone thought that tonight?* Angry, she stalked out of the store.

"Reed? Reed!" Jae called out.

The actress kept moving, her longer legs eating up the distance to the platform. She managed to slide through the doors of the monorail just as they were about to close. The train pulled out, and she could see a confused Jae standing on the platform. Looking back she could just make out the director run a hand through her short hair, then almost angrily fling the hand in the air. Jae faded from view as they left the lit station behind, and Reed continued to stare out of the window into the darkness.

Two girls were sitting toward the back of the car, leaning against each other and giggling—a lot like she and Jae had been earlier in the evening. *So were they? And what if they were?* Reed chewed her lip, mulling over the unexpected question her inner voice had posed. The doors hissed and opened and the young women left. Just as they pulled out, Reed caught a glimpse of a tall blond man leaning down to kiss one of them. *Guess not.*

So there was nothing unusual in her behaviour with Jae. Right? Right.

And if someone misinterpreted their friendship, that was their problem. *Like you have enough friends that you can toss them away over what some fucking store clerk thinks. Get used to it; this film is not going to help.* It had been one thing to read about Dar and Kerry: they were fictional—engaging, yes—but fictional none-the-less. But Holly.... Meeting Holly had turned a couple of assumptions right on their ear. She didn't leer at every woman she saw, though Reed couldn't help but notice her flirting with the ice cream stand clerk. Reed had found the woman to be intelligent with a wicked sense of humour. Pretty normal in fact. Did Holly get treated like she had? Thoughtfully, she continued to watch the park flit by under the incandescence of a thousand lights, hidden shadows revealing pockets of merriment as the train moved past them.

It still made her mad that someone would jump to such an idiotic conclusion about her or about Jae. Jae. She was going to owe the director a big apology. The announcer called the stop for The Floridian, and Reed prepared to disembark, barely waiting until the doors had opened before exiting the car.

Two more trains unloaded their passengers and still no Jae.

Discouraged, Reed made for the elevator that would take her to her room. The white plastic key card admitted her into the darkened chamber. Not bothering with lights, she opened the curtains, letting the outside lighting from the castle and lake, filter into the room.

She heard the soft click as Jae's room door shut, the sound transmitting through the open door between their rooms.

"Hey." Jae stood framed in the doorway.

"Hey," Reed answered.

Intense green eyes searched her face for a moment then broke contact. "Good night." The younger woman retreated back to her room.

"Good night," she whispered back, not moving from her spot facing the connecting room. Reed could hear the sounds of water running as Jae went about her nighttime routine. The blonde passed by the door a couple of times, then on her third trip looked over at Reed, seemingly surprised to find that the actress had yet to move.

"Reed?" Jae moved back to the door.

"I shouldn't have left you there."

"You want to talk about it?"

Reed shook her head.

Jae moved inside the room, stopping an arm's length from where Reed was standing. "You need to talk about it. You can't just keep bottling stuff up inside."

"The clerk...."

"I'm not talking about the clerk. I know what happened with her. I went back and asked. She's probably out looking for work now."

"Looking for work?" Reed wasn't sure what caused the biggest surprise—the fact that Jae went back to check, or that she had obviously taken some sort of action on her behalf.

"Um-hmm. Pavement pounding time. Disney has some pretty strict guidelines about how to treat guests. Rule number one—don't tick off the VIPs."

"Remind me not to piss you off."

"I'll add it to your contract." Jae had moved and taken a seat on the couch. "So, talk."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. It's rule three in the friendship handbook." She opened an imaginary book, running one finger down the non-existent page. "When the friend of the first part ... that's me ..." Jae tapped her own chest. "... makes it known to the friend of the second part ... that's you ..." this time pointing at Reed. "... that the friend of the first part...."

“How come you get to be the friend of the first part?” Reed settled her weight on the bed, stretching out lengthwise and resting her back against the headboard.

“It’s my rule book.”

“Right then ... carry on.”

Jae made a show of finding her place before she continued, “... first part is willing to listen, then the party of the second part shall make at least a token effort at allowing the friend to listen.” The director crisply shut the imaginary book and leaned back to put it on the end table.

Reed opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“Okay. I can see we need another approach here.” Jae rotated slightly and sat crossed-legged. “Let’s start with something easy. Do you have nightmares every night?”

“No. I think you should go ahead and ask a tough one,” Reed muttered sarcastically. “Not every night, no.”

“There now, was that so hard?” Jae grabbed the phone from the night table. “Two steamed milks, one with extra honey. Thanks. Wait, and some cookies too, please, Oreos if you have them. Thanks again.”

“I like my Oreos better with cold milk.” *Was that it? End of the chat?* Jae was calmly lounging on the sofa, short blonde locks sticking up where she had been running her hand through the bangs, and Reed waited for the other shoe to drop. Nothing. “All your sensitive chats come with food?” she asked to lighten the mood.

“Nope. Some come with a two-by-four.” The director gave her a saucy wink. “Now what scene was it that you needed to rehearse?”

NINE

"Roll camera." Jae leaned forward in her chair.

"Camera rolling."

Jae didn't even glance at the man operating the soundboard. "Speed."

"Speed." Sound acknowledged the command.

"Scene 24. Take 7." The slate snapped shut.

"Action." Jae stood up, unconsciously mouthing the words along with Gwen. In fact, given Reed's tendency to over rehearse, Jae figured she knew the scene better than McKitrick did. She'd enjoyed it though, and helping Reed prepare had given her a different perspective on the material they were shooting.

"Cut." Jae walked over to the set, leaning down over the table where the actors were seated. "Okay once more from, 'Can I ask you a personal question?'" She turned to the camera man. "This time I want medium length on them, then we'll reverse and repeat on Gwen."

The restaurant was all theirs, peopled only by cast, crew and extras. It was cheaper to shoot it here than to recreate it in the studio and unlike with the rides, the camera and lighting set up was fairly straightforward.

"Roll camera."

"Rolling."

"Speed."

"Speed."

"Scene 24. Take 8."

"Action."

Gwen had the first line. "Can I ask you a personal question?" A soft, slightly shy inquiry.

"Um, I can't guarantee I'll answer it, but yeah, go ahead."

McKitrick leaned forward and this time Reed didn't back away. "Is your name short for something, or is it just Dar?"

"Well, my mother was—is—I suppose still, an addict of Spanish romance novellas. She had a favorite character, Paladar. I'm named for that. I hated it. I had it legally changed when I turned eighteen." Jae smiled to herself, Reed had gotten the director to fess up that Jae was short for something. She'd smirked and told Reed that she would trade her name for something about the actress in return.

"Paladar. I don't know. I kind of like it, nice ring." Reed put the same panic-stricken look on her face that she got whenever Jae called her Eeyore in public, and Gwen responded to it. "Don't worry, though, I

won't use it. Not if you don't like it."

"What about you? Is Kerry short for something?"

"Kerrison. I don't use it much, even my resume has Kerry on it and all my official work documents." Gwen's timing was perfect, her tone a cross between amused and embarrassed.

Okay Reed, let's see a smile here, okay? Please? Jae mentally pleaded with the actress.

"Mmm, I know, that's why I asked." Reed glanced up with a grin. "I could have just logged in and found out otherwise."

YES! Jae pumped a mental fist. That just left one tough part to go. Maybe they would get out of this in only a couple more takes. Even if Reed froze up the rest of the scene they could start from much further on the next time. Jae hated chop and paste filming, preferring to film conversations continuously using a single master.

"That's so weird. You know all that stuff about me, and I ... it's just strange. I mean, it's not like I can just log in and find out about you."

"Kerry, you already know more about me than you'd find in the company computers. Your co-workers would be astonished to know what my house looks like or that I'm a diver, or what my real name is, for instance." Reed's tone had become quiet, pensive. It reminded Jae of her conversation with Reed the night before; only, unlike Kerry with Dar, Jae knew nothing of Reed's personal life.

"Well, that makes me feel better." Gwen blushed, and the director found herself wondering what the younger actress was thinking to achieve that particular shade of pink. *Well it sure beats having to have Make-up paint it on.* "You know, not to bring up a sore subject, but your real name reminds me of something."

"What's that? A package of marshmallows? That was a popular version when I was younger." Reed gently swirled the wine in her glass around, successfully trying to look disinterested in the answer.

Jae held her breath, here it was—the first signs that things were turning. Without the inner dialogue of the two characters to fill in the gaps, the energy of this scene was crucial. It had to be comedic, serious and sweet all at once. *C'mon, Roo, I know you can pull this off.*

"Oh, like Mallomar?" Two beats passed before Gwen continued, "Well, it's sweet and tasty." A deeper blush coloured Gwen's face, impressing Jae. Then the actress changed her tone to one of flustered awareness. "Um, that's not, I mean, I wasn't, um."

C'mon, Reed, Jae mentally encouraged, *play back.*

Reed chuckled softly. "Yeah, yeah, I know what you meant ... relax."

She paused. "What else were you thinking of?"

"Um ..." Gwen rubbed her face, under the guise of brushing back a non-existent stray lock of hair, as though trying to rub the flush away. "Paladins, actually."

Jae had no worries about the next lines. They could have been written just for the actress.

Reed dropped her voice a register and leaned in. "Kerry, I am not any kind of good guy, trust me, okay? I eat people for lunch. I fire people at the drop of a hat. I restructure companies to maximize profit for our company. Everyone hates my guts. So try to remember that, huh? Or you're in for a shock when we go into those meetings."

"Not everyone." Gwen supplied the next line, Jae again silently mouthing the words.

"Hmm?" Reed looked at her questioningly, the same look of disbelief on her face that had been there during their rehearsal the night before. Jae was beginning to realize that Reed drew on real life reactions to every day events, copying her own behavior, then reflecting it back onto film. The director found more of Reed showing up on film than Dar.

"Not everyone hates you. I don't."

I don't, Jae echoed silently, mentally finishing the scene. She let silence fall for a few seconds. "And, cut."

Reed looked up and met her eyes, one brow lifting in question. Jae grinned back and gave her a thumbs up. The actress nodded then removed herself from the table so they could shoot Gwen's dialog again from a closer angle.

Jae didn't even need to look at the tape to know that they had nailed it that last time. It had been the right decision to film the roller coaster stuff first, and allow Reed to get comfortable with the other woman before making them interact on film as friends.

"From 'Prime rib, larger prime rib'." Jae gave Gwen an encouraging squeeze on the shoulder. "You repeat this the way you handled the last bit, and we'll wrap this in one."

Gwen finished stretching and settled back into the chair. Then allowed the distance to be measured off, ensuring that the chair hadn't moved too far back to affect continuity. "Now that's something to shoot for," she quipped.

"Ha haa," Jae groaned. The later the hour, the worse the puns got.

Reed was lounging against a post, script in hand. *Wonder what it would take to get you to read lines to Gwen for these shots?* Jae mulled the idea over as an assistant moved in to give Gwen her vocal cues.

“Roll camera.” Then Jae forgot about Reed as she concentrated on what was happening in front of the camera.

TEN

"Can you get that?" Jae shifted into the bridge, wanting to play through the transition before stopping.

Reed put her script on the side table and rose out of the large armchair she had been curled up in, studying her lines. It had become a routine of sorts between them. The actress would study lines while Jae played the guitar she'd carted from Los Angeles, mentally working through problems until Reed was ready to rehearse the scene.

"Hello. No, this is the right number, hold on." Reed handed her the phone, mouthing "Ms. Waters."

"Hey, Cait. What's up?" If it had been an emergency, the assistant director would have called on the cell phone.

"I could ask you the same thing." Curiosity was evident, even over the clanking noise in the background.

Jae rolled her eyes. "Don't go there, Cait."

"You are no fun at all. Laura Regis just called. ET wants to do an on location fluff piece."

Jae could barely hear the assistant director over what sounded like a loudspeaker. "Where are you?" She was almost afraid to ask. Caitlynn had multi-tasking down to a science.

"QFC grocery. Aisle 7, pasta and rice." The AD paused, then added slyly, "Want me to pick you up a toaster oven?"

The director felt her cheeks go crimson, and she unconsciously looked to the door Reed had disappeared through moments before. "I'd settle for toast."

Cait laughed, then changed the topic. "You have enough left to film down there to make it worth sending them?"

Trapping the phone between her ear and shoulder, Jae continued to pluck away at the guitar, thinking. Her decision should be made based solely on what was good for the movie—and publicity was good. Entertainment Tonight definitely qualified as publicity, and generally, they put happy spins on their pieces.

Once again, her eyes were drawn to the open door connecting her room to Reed's. The actress had gone to her side of what they had come to consider their room, leaving her script behind and giving Jae some privacy. *How would Reed react? C'mon, Jae, forget Reed. It's not your job to protect her. What's best for the film?* She laid the guitar aside, getting off the bed to pace around the room. "If they can be here tomorrow for

prep and shoot the next day, then yes. Otherwise no, because we're gone the day after that." After a week, even she was beginning to tire of the Magic Kingdom and its head rodent.

"Ahead of schedule?" The tail end of Cait's words was muffled by the sound of canned goods rattling against the metal shopping buggy.

"Yep. Just exterior and a few establishing shots left." Jae paused again, mulling the shoot over in her head. Yeah, that would work—Reed and Gwen wandering through Disney World. Oddly enough, the one person who remained entranced by the nightly fireworks and rides was Reed. It was like she needed an excuse to let herself play but once she had one, Reed used it to the max.

"They were hoping for The Kiss."

"Oh piggy wonks, that stupid kiss."

"Piggy wonks?" Her assistant snickered into the phone. "Why can't you just swear like a normal person?"

"Sorry. Hollyism." Maybe playing Kerry in rehearsal to Reed's Dar was rubbing off a little too much. Now she was talking like Kerry. *That's not the only effect and you know it. Quiet!* she stilled the inner voice. She sighed. If there was one place in the continental US that Jae would cheerfully blow up, it was Crandon Beach. The location of Dar and Kerry's first kiss had taken on mythic proportions, the place now synonymous with the act. "Closed set for that scene. Tell them it still hasn't come up in the shooting schedule." She could just imagine Reed's reaction to having to film the kiss while ET was present.

"Will do."

"Everything else under control up there?" Jae asked. She had wanted to bring Caitlynn to Florida, but they had decided that her skills would be needed in Jae's absence. The little voice chimed in again. *And you got a much more interesting roommate out of it, too.*

"Marguiles and Ward have shot most of their scenes and close ups, so we can finish that when you get back," the AD confirmed.

Jae ticked the script over in her head. Did they need the Mariana and Dreyfus characters in Miami? No. And they were finished with Rachel Muniz too. She had made a very convincing Michelle Graver. The air between her and Reed crackled with tension masquerading as subtext. "Good. I shipped up the footage we've shot so far. Let the editing team and Chambers know it's coming. I've packaged the shooting notes and storyboards with it. They should have tons to work from."

"Hang on a sec." The intermittent clacking of the cart's wheels stopped, and the general noise level was muffled for a minute. "Kay.

Got it.”

“Already?”

“Two words for you—Palm Pilot,” Cait boasted.

“Square that.” Jae shot back four words “Not in this life.”

Caitlynn laughed. “Never say ‘never,’ babe.”

Jae shook her head, bemused. “See you in a couple of days.” She hit the off button and slid the phone back into its cradle.

Walking across the room she stood and looked out the window, and studied the pattern of the light dancing over the man-made lake. Frankly, she was surprised that there hadn’t been more media coverage already. It wasn’t every day that a film combined the sensationalism of controversial subject matter, a dead director and a reclusive star. *Come to think of it, that would make a hell of a movie on its own*, she chuckled to herself.

Turning from the view she picked up Reed’s copy of the script and flipped through it until she found the Crandon Beach scene. *Should I get it out of the way? They had some time to play with. Or shoot it last?* The mischievous inner voice that sounded remarkably like her Grandpa piped up. *And would Reed be wanting to rehearse that one with you too, Jae m’grrr!* She closed the script. *I should be so lucky.*

* * *

Reed could hear the intro notes of the song Jae had been working on earlier begin again. When the director began to sing, she knew it would be okay to return to the armchair and her prep work. She had worked with a dialogue coach all morning, and was preparing tomorrow’s scenes, confident that she had removed the last vestiges of her accent and the word “been” wouldn’t sound like a legume.

“I met you before the fall of Rome. And I begged you to let me take you home. You were wrong, I was right. You said goodbye, I said goodnight, woo hoo hoo. It’s all been done, woo hoo hoo. It’s all been done, woo hoo hoo. It’s all been done before.” Jae’s strong voice echoed between the rooms, picking up depth as it resonated between the chambers.

Reed found it amazing that the director could think and play at the same time, let alone sing, too. Over the last few days, they had settled into a routine. She would study her lines; Jae would play the guitar, occasionally leaping up to scribble something furiously on a note pad or sketch in her book. Then they would read through the scene together a

couple of times while she tried various approaches to the material. At first she'd worried that she was wasting Jae's time, but the director had assured her that while they may not be able to keep rehearsing together once they returned to Los Angeles, she was finding it useful, giving her a new way to look at the material.

"If I put my fingers here, and if I say 'I love you dear'.... And if I play the same three chords, will you just yawn and say 'Aaaah, it's a bit dated'? Woo hoo hoo. It's all been done, woo hoo hoo. It's all been done, woo hoo hoo. It's all been done before."

She continued to listen to Jae sing, not quite ready to go back to work just yet.

"Alone and bored on a 30th century night. Will I see you on The Price Is Right? Will I cry, will I smile, as you run down the aisle? Woo hoo hoo. It's all been done, woo hoo hoo, It's all been done ... woo hoo hoo.... It's all been done before."

Maybe after they got back to Los Angeles, she'd go check out Jae's band one night, assuming they played again while Reed was there. One thing was for certain—she would definitely miss the time she spent with Jae. Part of her felt like she'd known the younger woman forever. *I met you before the fall of Rome*. She laughed. Even her mental singing voice was slightly off key.

"It's all been done, woo hoo hoo. It's all been done, woo hoo hoo. It's all been done before."

Reed sobered. If they weren't able to rehearse together in Los Angeles, that left her with a bit of a problem. She snorted. *A bit? Try a whole gig's worth*. Just exactly whom was she going to rehearse *that* scene with. Crandon Beach. Well, *those* scenes. The actress was well aware that they were approaching the end of the purely platonic material, and that except for some ensemble pieces and then whatever Jae needed to film back in Miami, her remaining scenes with Gwen carried a huge amount of overt lesbian content. *Overt Lesbian Content*. Sounded more like a dessert food label than a disclaimer.

She leaned against the doorframe joining their quarters, watching Jae finger pick a complex melody that she vaguely wanted to ascribe to Clapton, but couldn't quite place. Reed noticed her script was lying shut next to the director and briefly wondered what Jae had been looking for. Probably related to the phone call.

The blonde's fingers moved fluidly over the fret-board of the twelve-string guitar, and Reed watched as Jae moved in time to the music, her brilliant green eyes shuttered in concentration. *You could just ask you*

know, Jae knows it's creeping you out. Oh yeah right. Excuse me Jae, but I was wondering, could I practice the Crandon Beach scene with you? She'd be lucky if Jae didn't smack her for that. Reed felt her stomach clench. She didn't want to offend Jae, but there was no way she could do that scene cold. *I should find one of those bars; maybe Holly knows one.* Then, if she threw up during the kiss, it wouldn't be all over her co-star.

Jae stopped playing and slowly opened her eyes, a small smile lighting on her lips as Reed met her eyes. "Been listening long?"

"A bit." She hesitated, and Jae spoke again before she could think of what to say.

"I've got good news and bad news."

"I'll take the good news."

"ET is coming to do a spread."

"If that's the *good* news. I'm not sure I want to hear the bad news."

Jae studied her, putting aside the guitar. Emerald points of intensity searched her eyes for something; Reed didn't know what. "After ET is finished, you, Gwen and I fly to Miami."

Reed let the implication sink in. *Oh shit.* There could only be one possible reason they were going to Miami. Crandon Beach. She wasn't ready for those scenes yet. Afraid to say something that she would regret later, the actress turned on her heel and re-entered her room. The deep pile carpet muffled her footsteps, preventing the room from filling with the noise of her frustration. She'd thought that she'd have time. Time to work into this. It already seemed less daunting than it had a week ago. Now that time was gone.

"Why are you in this film?" Jae had followed behind and stood in the doorway, mirror image to the way she herself had just been standing. "You need to make a choice, Reed. Film it properly ... with everything I know you are capable of giving it—or quit wasting time."

Now she had her excuse. "Is that what I'm doing?" Jae flinched at the intensity of her words, but Reed didn't back off. "Wasting your fucking time?"

"Stop it."

And Reed knew she should. Knew deep down that Jae was wearing the blame for things that happened long ago. But better it ended right here, right now—on her terms.

The director's head seemed to shrink in the distance; Jae appearing to be much smaller and further away than she really was. Reed could feel her pulse jump, the vein at her left temple throbbing in time to her increased heart-rate. Everything slowed down, the air around her felt

heavy, and her words had an inevitability to them. “Melt the Ice Queen, was that on your list of projects?”

“Reed,” Jae’s voice was low, warning, “don’t make this about me. Why this film?”

Jae approached her like she would a skittish colt, moving into the room but not coming too close. Reed could feel her muscles quivering, the urge to lash out warring with the unexpected desire to talk. Why was Jae doing this?

“Why make this film?”

“Money. Simple as that.” Reed tried to inject as much venom as she could into her tone.

“You were making money in Japan.”

Her head jerked a little in involuntary surprise, and Reed swallowed nervously. Jae wasn’t playing the game; the director refused to be baited. The more she yelled, the calmer Jae got. It was maddening and reassuring at the same time. Before she could think of a response, Jae changed tacks again.

“And if it’s just money, then a simple kiss shouldn’t be a problem. It’s just acting, right? You’re an actor; act.”

Reed could feel her whole emotional house of cards shaking, and she wondered if Jae knew how many secrets had their answers in that last exchange. Ironical really. Roan had presented his own set of dangers to secrets long buried, dangers that she thought had died with him. They hadn’t died at all. Inside of her, things were stirring to life that she had thought better buried and forgotten.

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“Then explain it to me, Reed. Help me understand.” Green eyes unflinchingly met hers. There was no distaste or judgement, only concern and curiosity. And something else. Reed hadn’t seen it in so long she almost missed it. Friendship. Jae’s eyes said—more clearly than any words could have—*I’m here*. Question was—for how long?

The slamming of a room door sounded in the quiet impasse and drew Reed back through the years to the sound of a stage door slamming closed behind her, taking with it her hopes and dreams ... but in the end leaving her with something of infinitely greater value.

“It must be pretty important if you’re willing to make a film you hate so much.”

Reed’s words echoed her thoughts unconsciously as she whispered, “The most important thing in the world.”

“What’s that?” Jae’s soft voice wrapped around her, and Reed stared

down at the floor, letting the gentle inquiry pass unanswered.

Images of a dark headed baby in diapers merged with the curly haired child waiting for his chance at a future and swam in the tears clouding her eyes. Coming to make the film had been a catch-22. She made the film, and the paycheck bought Rio his chance, and things would work out; or she made the film, and it would have cost her the time he had left. Having the money didn't guarantee him anything; it just bought him an entry ticket.

Reed knew that was part of her frustration. That, even by making this film, even by discarding the beliefs of a lifetime, it might not be enough. And then to have to re-evaluate those beliefs on top of everything else was too much.

"Let me in, Roo. You can't keep shouldering this on your own."

Strong arms enveloped her, and it was all Reed could do not to sag into Jae's embrace and the safety her body remembered finding there. *Can I? Can I trust this woman? Do I want to? Yes.* But still something held her back. Some last instinct for self-preservation kept her from stepping over the abyss. Her knees buckled slightly, tension undermining her strength and Jae guided her to the floor, not letting her fall. "I've got you."

And Reed stepped over. The familiar words forming a bridge between them. "My son." Then the burden of unshed tears crashed over her, swallowing the rest of her words in their torrent, and she burrowed into the shoulder cradling her head, anchoring herself again to the slight blonde.

Of all the things Jae had expected to hear, this hadn't even been in the running. *Her son?* That raised more questions than it answered but suddenly a lot of little things about Reed made sense. It didn't explain the homophobia, but it did explain why the actress had agreed to make a movie for a man who, by all accounts, she hated ... a man whose set she had walked away from, all but destroying her career in the process.

She'd been worried that she had pushed the actress too far. That she had let her frustration get to her. But the actress hadn't run, and Jae had hung in, probing for information. The odd part was that she had had to put her director's hat aside and just be Jae. It usually went the other way when she got herself into sensitive type chats: her professional mask allowed her to weather the storms of intimacy and kept the personal stake in events to a minimum. Jae knew she'd done it with Becky, had let the other woman blame it on her job and then had played the part expected of her.

The silent sobs of the woman in her arms were beginning to subside, and Jae tried to think of what to say next. It was important that Reed not feel vulnerable or embarrassed. The actress had probably been hit with too many questions already, so as much as she wanted more details, Jae sensed this was not the time to ask for them.

They must have been talking and sitting there for longer than she realized because the natural light in the room was throwing long shadows into the corner. Jae shifted slightly and leaned so her back was against the bed, drawing Reed with her. The new position freed one arm, and she wrapped it more securely around the other woman. The phone rang in her room and she let its shrill ring fill the quiet air, and moved her hand in small circles over Reed's back, hoping that the phone would stop ringing before the mood was lost.

Time lost all sense of meaning for Jae as she sat in the gathering darkness. The slow measured beats of her own heart at odds with the ragged rhythm of Reed's breathing, yet strangely tied together by the insistent pounding of the actress' heart, which Jae could feel beating against her side. The sense of peace that she had glimpsed during the carousel ride was back, stronger this time and Jae tilted her head back and let it claim her. Shallow breaths filled the room, hers and Reed's chests rising and falling together as the actress calmed in her arms.

Her mind wandered, tripping along paths that twisted through her thoughts, as she allowed free rein to her imagination. It was so easy to translate the immediate weight of the woman in her arms to scenery of a future. Ruthlessly she thrust those thoughts away, and drifted instead into a kata, letting her mind perform the exercise routine that her muscles knew by heart.

Reed stirred, and the spell broke. Jae realized she still hadn't figured out what she should say. Raven tresses spilled across the blonde's shoulder as Reed slid back a little, no longer burrowed into Jae's chest. But she didn't pull completely away either, leaving her head pillowed on Jae's shoulder.

Jae turned her head slightly. Blue eyes rimmed with red looked back at her solemnly, so she smiled gently. "Jacqueline," she whispered.

Reed's brow furrowed in confusion.

Chuckling, she spoke louder. Her voice sounded full and loud to her ears after the quiet of the recent past. "It's short for Jacqueline."

The low laugh that rang out through the room warmed her unexpectedly, and Jae knew she had found the right thing to say.

Light steam filled the air in front of the bathroom. Tiny droplets of water condensed on the mirror hanging on the wall, the small beads running down the polished face in haphazard trails of clarity on the mostly obscured surface. Even more steam filled the bathroom, hiding the occupant of the bath from view, though Jae could clearly hear the water lapping against the sides of the tub as Reed moved around.

Careful to balance the two mugs in her left hand, she rapped lightly on the open bathroom door, not wanting to startle Reed. "Cocoa's here. Want it now or later?" Jae hovered at the edge of the small room, wary about intruding on the actress' privacy.

Water slapped against metal and flesh as Reed moved in response to her inquiry. "C'mon in."

Jae shook her head then entered the room. Yet another inconsistency about Reed. Modesty did not appear to be a problem. She inadvertently glanced down as she handed over the mug. Her hand touched Reed's momentarily and she was glad that the actress had taken a firm grip on the cup.

Laid out in the tub was the most erotic form Jae had ever seen. Hastily she averted her eyes and tried to erase the lingering image of the woman from her mind's eye. *C'mon, Jae, she trusts you. This is no time get moonstruck.* She took a seat on the toilet, facing the same direction as Reed, and took a slow sip from her own mug. Her pulse returned to normal, and she was able to push aside the sight of Reed's body barely hidden by opaque water and migratory bubbles. Silence prevailed and Jae tried to figure out how to broach the subject of Reed's son.

"You could just ask you know. In fact, it could be considered the opening to polite social conversation." Reed's tone was matter of fact, almost offhanded, but Jae could read the humour colouring the words as the actress turned one of her own arguments against her.

Laughing, she looked sidelong at Reed. "Busted, hunh?"

"Well I think it's the longest you've gone without asking a single question since I met you." Reed had rested the mug on her stomach, just above her navel, palms cupping the stoneware, elbows resting comfortably at her sides.

"What's his name?"

"Riordan."

"Nice. Gaelic?" *That's it, Jae, stick with easy ones.* She took another swallow from her mug while waiting for Reed to answer.

Instead, the actress took another drink, the water sloshing around as she moved, and just nodded.

It was nice, Jae reflected, to spend time with a woman and not have to worry about all the things involved in being romantically entangled with her. When silences broke out between her and Reed, she no longer felt the need to fill them, to entertain the actress. She crossed her legs and leaned back into the small divider in the wall behind her, resting her weight on the wall instead of the silver hardware and fixtures.

“How’d you get from Jacqueline to Jae?”

“Laziness.”

Reed snorted.

“Cross my heart.” She did so solemnly. “There were three other Jacquelines in my class, so I jumped at the excuse and shortened it.”

“I still don’t see it.”

“Ah, but let me tell you what I shortened it from—Jacqueline Anna Elizabeth.” She waited for Reed to catch on.

A warm chuckle reverberated from the three walls around the tub then filled the room, and Jae laughed along with her, the memory of her mother’s reaction to her shortened name, sparking her own mirth.

“Riordan likes to be called Rio.”

“How do you get from Rear-den to Rio?” She sounded out the name, its unfamiliar syllables giving her trouble.

“First three letters, R-I-O.” The cup was placed on the floor next to the tub and with a sudden heave Reed stood, water sluicing from her body.

Jae stood too, trying to find somewhere, anywhere else to look. “I’ll leave you to dry off and stuff,” she mumbled, then made for the door.

“Jae?”

She froze, hoping that when she turned around, Reed would already have draped a towel around her body. Reed was perfectly safe, Jae would never touch her, but that didn’t mean the director wanted any more detailed pictures to add to idle fantasies either.

She turned.

The bath had done wonders for Reed. The actress’ eyes were no longer puffy, and her body had taken on a healthy glow, the steam and heat stimulating the pores in the golden skin. Aqua gems smiled at her, and Jae felt her sense of reality slide a little further beyond her control.

“Thanks.” Reed smiled at her, an honest to goodness open smile, and Jae nearly forgot to breathe. The smile transformed the stark angularity of Reed’s face, revealing an unexpected depth of warmth.

“You’re welcome,” she said, then left, closing the door slightly behind

her.

This was the best part of a bath, the rapid pass of the slightly rough fibres over her skin. The motion reddened her skin in a different way than the hot water of the bath had and left every inch within reach tingling and alive. Reed threw the towel on the recently vacated toilet seat and pulled the shower curtain closed. A side benefit to hotel room showers was the unlimited hot water.

Turning the water on full blast, she stood under the pulsating spray, letting the jets of liquid fire wash away the day and anything the bath or towel hadn't. Reed sensed her reprieve from Jae's questions was nearly over, and she weighed how much to tell the other woman. *How much? How far do I trust you?* It would, though, be nice to not have to be so secretive about calling Rio, or his calls to her. *Would Jae, if she knew the reason, help with the time difference? Or do I want to owe her anything?* The water beat down on her face, as she tilted her head up to meet the blast.

I'll answer her questions about Rio, but nothing about the past or about Roan. That was a piece of information best buried with— *With who, his father?* Angrily she rubbed the water out of her eyes. *You were never his father, you bastard.* Reed turned the water up, increasing the temperature, then grabbed the soap and began to lather her body again.

Gingerly she poked at the core of anger, surprised to find it there at all. The memories had been locked down so tightly that even when she thought about the night that Rio was born, she felt nothing, not even on the night she'd heard Roan was dead. Heidi had seemed to feel more than she did ... and her friend didn't know the half of it.

Would Jae accept half the story, half the truth? I hope so. She smiled then spit the water that filled her mouth back into the shower. It would probably be just like Jae to hit the Emporium and send souvenirs back to Rio. *And what would be so terrible about that? Nothing.* She finished her mental conversation and turned off the water, then stepped out of the tub.

The terry cloth robe barely came to her calves and she cinched the belt tight, wishing her own powder blue one was lurking about. Reed canted her head to one side and squeezed the excess moisture from the long black tresses. By habit, she scanned the flattened hair, eyes sharp for signs of the first gray in her roots. *God only knows I should have been gray long since.* None. She gave herself a satisfied smirk in the mirror and winked. Blue eyes twinkled back at her in surprise. The heavy lines of tension that she expected to find lining her eyes were gone, and if Reed didn't know better she'd have said she looked almost happy.

"Happiness isn't in your cards. Remember?"

"You say something, Reed?" Jae called from the sitting room.

"Just mumbling to myself." A quick flick of the wrist and the towel was over the shower rod and the light was off. "Any more cocoa?"

A huge carafe was held aloft. "I figured it was going to be a long night," the director clarified, smiling.

"You going to share?" She held out her mug imperiously, haughtily standing at her full height, a smidgen under six feet.

"You do know that Amazon Ice Queen isn't a rank right?"

She flinched momentarily before catching the humour in Jae's lilting remark. *You're the one that brought it into the open, so deal.* "That depends entirely on your point of view."

The blonde laughed, and Reed found herself glad that she had let the joke slip by. Her eyes narrowed slightly. *The next crewman who uses it might not be so lucky, though.* It would be just her luck to have Jae add it to the growing list of nicknames.

"So tell me."

Reed's stomach clenched. *Here it comes.*

"What are little boys into these days?" Jae finished, then patted the couch next to her.

She eased down onto the upholstered surface, the large cushion giving gently under her weight. "I don't know about most little boys, but Rio has a thing for computers and Kinex."

"Easy things to play with when you're sick."

The mug nearly crashed to the floor, the relaxed grip she had on it almost not enough to keep the cup and its contents balanced on the arm of the forest green sofa. "How...?"

The director shrugged. "I listened, Reed, as much to what you didn't say as to what you did."

"Oh." She took a gulp of the cooling drink, buying time to respond. *That was different. Someone was listening.*

"You don't have to talk about this tonight." Green eyes danced with humour. "We could rehearse instead."

"You know that being caught between a rock and a hard place is just a proverb right?" Reed deadpanned.

"Only in Newfoundland, Roo, only in Newfoundland," came the sober pronouncement.

The incongruity of it struck her, and Reed laughed, once again clutching the cup to keep from spilling its contents onto the floor and anything else within reach. "Rio would like you."

“Really? How come?”

“Cause you make me laugh.” The remark was off-hand, but the truth slammed home. Jae did make her laugh, more than anyone except Rio. Suddenly the idea of sharing with this woman wasn’t nearly as frightening a prospect as it had been. “Can I have a rain check on the rehearsal?” she asked softly.

Jae took a long sip, obviously relishing the flavour of the rich cocoa. Cheeks bulged slightly as she swirled it around her mouth. “It doesn’t waste my time,” she said.

It took Reed a moment to mentally catch up to the director. Like the blonde’s body, it seemed her mind was in constant motion. Even now in a time of seeming repose, Jae wasn’t completely still. Reminded of her earlier angry words, Reed rubbed her thumb along the rim of the mug. “Okay,” she mumbled.

A hand brushed her collarbone where small drops of water were still pooled—the last remnants of the water seeping from the inky tresses. “But you’ve got to admit, it does look like you are melting.”

ELEVEN

“No.”

“Just one more.” The location director for Entertainment Tonight was pushing for another set of shots, and had pushed Jae’s patience to the limit in the process.

“We’re done. I have work to do.”

“But, Ms. Cavanaugh.”

The protest fell on deaf ears as Jae flipped through the storyboards. *Shoot this one; this angle is wrong for the sun; shoot this.* The director looked up at the fading light. They had all the ‘romping’ shots they needed, thanks to Entertainment Tonight, but she was running out of time for the rest.

“Marks,” she called before her temporary assistant could issue the order. The actors obediently took their places and waited for the cue to begin moving. Reed and Gwen were just out of camera range, ready to stroll through the framed shot when cued.

Filming a crowd scene wasn’t as simple as aiming the camera at a crowd and taking footage. The details were important and needed to be staged in order to stand out. Little things like team logos on baseball caps were important to help the audience feel part of the movie. It didn’t matter that the odds of seeing someone they knew were beyond miniscule—what mattered was the illusion that those people could be your friends or neighbors. Normally they could have incorporated crowd shots from the park, since entering Disney World was, in itself, implicit permission to be photographed or filmed. It wasn’t a good idea for this particular film, considering its subject matter. All they needed was for someone in the crowd to object to being in the film, and release could be held up months while the legal tangles were sorted out or the scenes were re-edited.

Jae studied the human composition, decided it didn’t need any tweaking, and motioned to Reed and Gwen. “Roll cameras.”

“Rolling.”

Sound wasn’t involved in this; the dialogue and crowd noises would be added later in the studio. The scene unfolded in her monitor, and she tracked the movement of the leads through the crowd, careful to ensure that the extras weren’t simply moving back and forth around them. *There. Damn.* “Cut.” A young boy had crossed in front of Gwen and Reed for the third time.

The assistant, an anxious young man, materialized at her shoulder. It wasn't his fault he wasn't Cait, so she kept her voice calm. "Reset the crowd, and if you have to keep using the same kid, at least get him a different hat or shirt."

"Yes, ma'am." He sped off, clipboard in hand.

The Director of Photography, Erich Weiss, joined her, sketchbook and loose drawings bundled under his arm. "Going to be a gorgeous sunset."

"What have you got in mind?"

"Well we've lost the natural light for the next scene, and unless you want to come back tomorrow, why don't we shoot it this way ... from here." He traced his finger along the original drawing then quickly added details with a piece of conté.

"Right, and have the medium range shots come from this direction." Jae added some lines of her own and nodded her approval. "Let's get this one finished and squeeze the next one off."

"I'll get the third camera prepped and ready to move." The Director of Photography was already turning to find a Foley operator. His gray hair neatly tied back in a ponytail, the DP was a walking advertisement for the 60's style artist.

"Marks." Everybody returned to his or her places, and Jae counted off mentally. "Roll cameras."

"Rolling." The cameraman and focus operator tracked the movement, slowly panning across the group. To her left, another camera recorded the scene, the lens moving with the traffic flowing in the direction opposite that of the leads.

Finally. They had it. "Cut and print." Jae rolled her shoulders to relieve the tension that had built up between her shoulder blades.

The grips and best boys swung into action, rapidly dismantling the minimal lighting and camera set-up. Two Gators were hitched up to the small equipment trailers, and Jae popped into the passenger seat of one of the small, green, all terrain vehicles. The engine throbbed making the small vehicle vibrate and conversation difficult, so she opted to wait before calling Cait.

She was racing full dark, but Erich's plan was a good one. "Got to remember to thank him for that." The DP could have walked away when Roan died. Like Jae herself, Erich's contract had been with Roan personally. In fact, a lot of the crew still had vacancies in the senior positions, the rest cobbled together with a mix of friends and people who had elected to stay.

They stopped and the techies began unloading and setting up, some of

the work already accomplished by Erich and the Foley crew. That had turned out to be one advantage of the upheaval and vacancies—the crew was less rigid about tasks, and the set had a team atmosphere.

“Are the stand-ins ready?” Jae asked.

“Yes, Ms. Cavanaugh.”

“Get them to the tables, we’ll do the angle checks and lighting.” Her attention was already back on the storyboards. Her assistant mentally dismissed, Jae ran invisible tape in her imagination, mentally capturing each shot she wanted from this last series. The close up shots had been filmed earlier in the week, and they needed to make sure that continuity held between the exterior ‘ambiance’ shots and the detail sequences.

“Are Lewis and McKitrick through wardrobe yet?”

“I’ll check.” The young man moved with a sense of urgency that had been lacking earlier and returned swiftly, slightly out of breath. “Just finishing.”

“Thanks.”

“We’re ready, Jae,” Erich called across the tangle of wires that connected the cameras to the huge batteries. The whole process had taken them less than twenty minutes, and Jae began to relax a little. In spite of the time lost with ET, it looked like they might finish up tonight after all.

“Places,” the young AD called, and the director took a second to flash him a smile and a nod of approval.

“Roll camera.”

“Rolling.”

A waiter approached the couple seated at the table, both women smiling as the order was placed. Jae’s monitor focused more tightly on the action than what the other cameras were actually shooting. The wind ruffled Reed’s hair slightly, and Jae smiled to herself. In contrast to the tension of shooting the news magazine footage in tandem with regular shooting earlier, the actress seemed more relaxed in her role than ever.

It showed on the tape, too. For a moment, Jae was tempted to reshoot the close-up footage. *Let it go, Jae, it’s two minutes of the movie—and that’s if it stays in.* That’s what the whole week came down to, seven and a half minutes of screen time, or less.

“Cut. Hold places. That was good, people. Just one more time to make sure we have it all.” Jae made some notes on her shooting draft, already editing the footage in her mind. “Reset, and on my mark.” The prop crew whisked the original drinks away from the table, and the waiter

returned to his place in the shadows.

"Set." Props signaled they were ready.

"Roll camera."

"Rolling."

The action unfolded again, a near replica of what had just been shot. Out of the corner of her eye, the director could see the sound-effects team making notes about the noises around them. As with the other exterior shots, the sound track for this segment would be laid down in the sound studio.

The monitor showed only the steady progress of the scene, no hitches. Good. "Cut. That's a wrap."

Around her the crew erupted in a flurry of activity. Lights, cameras and batteries disappeared, leaving only the splendor of a twilight sky in a brightly decorated theme park behind them.

Distracted, the beauty was lost on Jae. "Cait, what did Paramount say?" She clasped the cell between her shoulder and ear, and scribbled noted with her free hands.

"Hello. I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"What? Okay. Hello, Cait, how are you, how's Thom? Now, what did Paramount say?"

"They can give you three hours. Editing bay two."

"Thanks. Knew I could count on you." She traded the pencil for the phone, ready to ring off. Her right hand found its way to her hair, and Jae leaned on her elbow, fingers entwined with her hair, thinking.

"Wait. I chartered the plane. I'll fax the details through to the hotel. Flight leaves at one."

"P.M. right?"

Caitlynn chuckled, "Right. How'd the shoot go?"

"Lousy. Next location shoot you're coming too."

"Next location shoot is Michigan in winter, and I'm thinking you will be just fine on your own."

"Wuss," she playfully accused her assistant.

"Do you have any idea what a hat does to my hair?"

"Worse than rain?"

"You know it, hon. Speaking of which, I have a date with Raoul the Stylist and some silk therapy." Unlike Jae's short blonde locks, Cait's long hair refused to behave and needed taming on a regular basis.

"What colour this time?"

"Same old basic black, goes with anything."

"We could rename the colour. Something like, *filme noire*." The

location equipment had all been packed away and a crewman loitered to her right, ready to steal her chair the second she moved. Cooperating, Jae stood.

“That stunk, even for you.”

“Yeah well, we all can’t be Ellen. I have to go. I’ll send the new film up tonight after I check the dailies and do a preliminary cut.”

“I’ll warn editing. Chambers was impressed with the roller coaster footage by the way.”

“Good. Night, Cait.”

“Later, Hollywood.”

Mood improved, Jae pocketed the cell phone and joined the DP and her assistant. “Ready?”

“Totally,” Erich answered.

The assistant also nodded, and followed behind them as they made for one of the ‘secret’ park entrances and their ride to Paramount.

A twinge in the back of her mind made her pause before she joined the others as they piled into the rental car. Jae slumped against the passenger door and tried to put her finger on the tenuous feeling. Nothing came to mind, and she shrugged it off as fatigue from a long day that was only going to get longer.

* * *

Jae wasn’t going to show; she’d been stood up. Reed tried to shake-off the disappointment. She dug in the pocket of her pants until she felt the leather strap of the Timex Atlantis watch. *Ten o’clock, now what?*

“Yo, Reed.”

Holly and her friend Maribel made their way through the crowd to where she sat at a table overlooking an artificial lake. Originally she’d assumed the two were lovers and had been amazed to discover that they were just friends. Maribel had joked that the author wasn’t her type, and Reed had wondered for a split-second just what her type was before the librarian had revealed that she was straight.

Forcing herself to be polite, Reed stood and gestured at the empty chairs. Around her, excitement swelled as families and assorted groups of people awaited the first volley of the laser light show. A quick computer search had verified that Disney World did indeed have the same laser light show as Disneyland—Jae had simply misspelled it. *So much for that surprise.*

Holly took a long look at her, and Reed was left with the

uncomfortable feeling the other woman had seen more than the actress had intended to reveal. Whatever it was, the author didn't comment, just took a seat next to Reed, facing the water. Likewise, Maribel eased her chair around the end of the table to bring the action on the lake into view.

Music filled the air, then a bright flash of light revealed the Sorcerer's Apprentice as the dance between the forces of light and dark began.

* * *

An entirely different brand of music spilled onto the street where, two hours later, she stood outside a nightclub, flanked by Holly and Maribel.

"Are you sure about this?"

"No." In spite of her denial, Reed moved toward the wooden door.

The pedestrian traffic moved around them, no one pausing to spare them a second glance. Neon signs glowed eerily in the lamplit night, diffuse colours garishly reflecting from walls and windows. The lettering above the awning read 'RUMOURS,' gold nearly faded into the black canvas.

"Yo, Reed."

Startled, she jumped slightly then turned to look at Holly. The other woman wore an enigmatic grin. "What?" she asked, drawing out the word.

"You've been staring at the door for five minutes."

Without replying, she tugged open the door. A long flight of red carpeted steps stretched in front of her, terminating in a gaping maw of night. Periodically flashes of light revealed that there was more beyond the foot of the stairs.

C'mon, Reed it's a bar, not a jungle. There are no lions, tigers, and bears. The actress steeled her resolve and barreled down the stairs and into the room beyond. *Oh my.* She stopped, eyes wide.

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined what the inside of a women's bar would actually be like. *Not even close.* A pool table stood in one corner, a dozen or so women gathered around the field of combat. *Almost, not quite,* she thought wryly. Holly and Maribel moved past her, and Reed dug herself out of examining the bar long enough to follow them to a back corner.

She locked eyes with Holly as they silently argued over who got the catbird seat, the other woman letting her win. "Thank you," she acknowledged, sitting on the sofa. Holly settled in next to her, while

Maribel perched on the edge of a chair across from them.

Reed continued to study the surroundings. Every available inch of wall space was either painted black or covered with a variety of framed posters. Some of which were interesting. She snorted. *Interesting is an understatement.* To her left, Melissa Etheridge displayed her back along with her guitar, sans shirt, while to her immediate right two women—at least she thought there were only two—were engaged in some form of tantric yoga.

The dance floor teemed with wriggling bodies in various states of dress, or undress, depending—she supposed—on your point of view. She blinked, as her point of view revealed more of a dancing blonde than she really needed to see.

That was, to her surprise, the exception rather than the rule. Most of the women were just sitting and chatting, some were dancing, and some were draped over the pool table, but no one was making out in the corners.

“What can I get you girls?”

“Whiskey sour,” Reed ordered, adding hard liquor to the three beers she had consumed earlier. The waitress’ eyes lingered on hers a moment before the brunette turned to Holly.

“Tuborg.”

“And you?” Her eyes darted back to Reed’s, though she was taking the librarian’s order.

“Pepsi, please.” Maribel got up and made for the opposite side of the bar where, Reed presumed, the facilities were located.

“No problem.” The woman left with one last look back.

Holly shook her head. “This is the last time I bring you to a women’s bar.”

“What?”

“Never bring a babe magnet to a women’s bar when you, yourself, are single. Reed, she was checking you out.”

“Was not.”

“Okay.”

“She was not,” Reed muttered. *Was she?* She replayed the brief encounter over in her mind trying to pinpoint what Holly was talking about. *I don’t feel like I’ve been checked out. Christ. Now I sound like a library book.* The woman hadn’t leered, there was no whistle, no ‘how do you like your eggs?’, nothing, or at least nothing she was used to getting from men. She decided that Holly was pulling her leg.

The music throbbed and hummed. Acoustic rock poured over the

dancers and spilled out to the edges of the bar. Sheryl Crow's tribe was busy doing it on a Saturday night just to see what it was all about. Which pretty much summed up why she was here. *Okay. So, now what?*

The brunette waitress sat on the arm of the loveseat, one leg almost, but not quite, touching hers. Reed swallowed and looked at Holly. The author leaned in and draped an arm across Reed's shoulders. "Let me."

Almost instantly the gap between her leg and the server's widened. The woman made change for Holly, then left without a backward glance.

"Thanks."

Holly leaned back, smiling. "No problem."

Reed shot her a suspicious look. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Fine, okay. She was checking me out."

"Who was checking you out, Reed?" Maribel asked as she returned.

"No one."

"The waitress," Holly answered.

Maribel nodded. "She was cute."

"I thought you were straight," Reed commented, dumbfounded.

"I am. Haven't you ever found a woman aesthetically pleasing? Not sexually, but just easy on the eyes?" Maribel had settled back into her chair and was stirring the ice in her glass around with the straw.

Reed's first instinct was to say, 'No, of course not.' But having lived and worked in the industry, she knew she evaluated the way a woman looked all the time—if for no other reason than to see how she compared. Hollywood was driven by 'The Look'—you had to know how you stacked up. "Yes. I suppose," she hedged.

"No, not the meat market stuff of Tinseltown. Aesthetics." Maribel looked around the bar. "Look at the short woman standing by that pillar. See how her features are balanced; how when she smiles, it lights up her eyes?"

Reed looked, trying not to evaluate the woman by the standards of Hollywood competition. She could see what Maribel meant, the young woman had vitality, a lot like Jae's, and it did make her attractive. She looked around the bar, amazed at the variety of women present.

"Yo, Reed."

"Hmm."

"You're staring." Holly was watching her with that enigmatic grin again.

"Observing."

"Well you've been observing the blonde in the corner for the last few minutes."

"So."

"So, she's headed this way." The enigmatic grin became a full smile. "Welcome to Method Acting 201."

Oh shit! Now what? The blonde had threaded her way past the line of women waiting for bar service, and Reed felt her stomach tighten. *What the hell do I say? "Hello. I'm not a Lesbian, but I play one in a movie."* She was out of time; the woman smiled down at her.

"Dance with me?"

"No."

"No?"

"No?" Maribel echoed the question. "Come on, Reed, it'll be fun." The dance mix of Cher's newest chart-topper poured from the speakers, and the parquet dance floor teemed with women.

"Yeah, Reed. It'll be fun." Holly stood and moved next to her friend, waiting for Reed to make up her mind.

"Please," the stranger added, then offered her hand. "Name's MJ."

Reed hesitated.

Maribel cut in smoothly and performed the introductions. "I'm Maribel, this is Holly and that's Reed."

"Cool. Shall we?"

"After you."

Reluctantly the actress trailed them to the dance floor and tried not to think about what she was doing. *What the hell am I doing here? I am in a women's bar.* She used the same term Holly had used. *Dancing with a woman—who is 'checking me out.' More alcohol. Definitely need more alcohol.* The song ended and Reed bolted for her seat, disappointed to discover she had finished her drink.

"Would you like another?" MJ asked. The tall blonde was leaning against the arm of the sofa and had picked up Reed's empty glass.

She nodded in acquiescence.

"A woman of few words. I like that." She held the tumbler under her nose and sniffed at the remains. "Whiskey sour, Ol' Granddad's." The other woman squeezed her shoulder, and it was all Reed could do not to flinch. "Be right back."

"I can't do this, Holly."

The author stared at her a moment before speaking. "What did you think was going to happen? It's a gay bar, Reed. Women are going to hit on you. That was the point wasn't it?"

“Who—”

Holly cut her off. “Get over it, Reed. It’s just a kiss. It’s not contagious and even if it were, it’s not life threatening. And for the record, if you plan to get drunk enough to let her kiss you, then you’re worse than any man.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

The author leaned forward. “She might be a dyke, Reed, but believe it or not she has feelings. Just like you, and just like me or Maribel or Jae or any other human being.”

“Don’t compare me to them.”

“It’s not a ‘them’ any more, Reed.”

“Fuck you,” she spat.

Holly laughed. “That would be a little hypocritical of you, wouldn’t it?”

She took the stairs two at a time. Unconcerned with the incoming traffic, she shouldered her way through the throng and escaped onto the street.

* * *

“There.” Jae leaned back in her chair and hit play. The tape was still disjointed, but the majority of what she wanted to convey came across, with plenty of extra material as fudge space.

Her assistant snored softly in a corner. His tousled black hair fell over his eyes as he slumbered in a chair tilted against the wall, the nineteen-hour day having proved too demanding.

Erich re-entered the room. “Car’ll be around in a moment.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

“No problem. Have you decided how you want to frame Crandon Beach yet?”

“The basic blocking. But I want to see the beach for myself first. If it weren’t for the issue of sunset and moonrise, I’d shoot it in LA.” The horizon position was wrong to be shooting the East Coast scenes on the West Coast. And there was no way that she was going to use a cheesy CGI moon.

The DP nodded. “I had a look about two months ago. Nice beach, plenty of room for lighting and equipment.”

“That’s a blessing at least. One less thing to worry about.”

“How many takes do you figure?”

She thought about it. *To get the action itself? Not more than six or seven.*

But to get the emotion of the scene? I don't even want to think about it. But it might be a plan to order lots of extra tape. Jae ran her fingers through her hair. "Put me down for twenty."

Erich laughed and made a note in a little blue pad. "Optimist."

"Yeah well, it's bad for morale if the director bets too high." Truth was, she'd be happy to get it shot in less than fifty. It was a time-honoured tradition for the crew to bet on the number of takes that some scenes would require, though the director was supposed to turn a blind eye to it.

Their driver stuck his head in the room, to let them know he had arrived. "Car's here, ma'am."

"Thanks." Jae picked up her backpack and walked across the room. "Wake up." For her assistant it was after mid-night; for her it was still early, her circadian rhythms still marching to LA time. Groggily he got up and followed them out to the car.

Jae leaned against the locked door and mulled over the upcoming shoot. *How do I get the fireworks to.... Oh, my God ... the fireworks.* Jae sat up and hooked her fingers in her hair. *I can't believe I did that. Why not?* her internal narrator asked, calling her on it. *You did it to Becky all the time.*

The drive to The Floridian seemed to take three times as long as she remembered, and it was with equal measures of relief and anxiety that she greeted the sight of the familiar lake and Victorian architecture.

The elevator was in league with the roads and took twice its normal time to descend to the lobby. In perfect symbiotic application of Murphy's Law, the car filled with other passengers, at least one of which got off at every floor between the lobby and their room on the sixth floor.

Jae paused before she slid the keycard into the slot, mustering her courage and arguments. *Right. It's not like you don't have practice with this.* Her internal voice popped up again. *It's not like she's your girlfriend or anything, now is it, Jae m'grrl?* The room was dark, no lights were on, and there was no sound coming from Reed's half.

She found the light switch and illuminated the room. The connecting door was shut. "Not good, Jae. Not good at all." Not since their first night in the hotel had either one of them shut the door, and Jae stared at it in disbelief. *Now what?* She didn't dare try the handle, to see if it was locked or not, lest she wake Reed.

"I'll grovel." One boot hit the floor with a thud and she struggled with the other one before sitting down on the bed to remove it. Question was,

how? Girlfriend groveling she had down pat, and for the most part it worked. And for the rare occasions it failed, there was always flowers, or home cooked dinners.

But what would Reed accept? Try this, Wunderkind—the truth. Would Reed understand the truth? Jae flopped back onto the bed, still wearing her chinos and shirt. Would she accept that sometimes when I’m working, I just lose track of the time. That I get so excited by the way that images come together, everything else gets pushed aside? Her fingers again crept through her hair, the silky touch of the strands felt soothing against her palm. *No one else had.*

Even Becky, who worked in the industry, hadn’t understood that she honestly lost track of things when she was working. The actress had accused her of doing it deliberately and nothing Jae said could convince her otherwise, so eventually she’d quit trying. Her girlfriend’s eyes would glaze over when technical talk came up, and Jae had given up trying to share her work.

Yeah, that’s the ticket. Try the truth first. Jae smiled to herself and pulled her sketchpad off the nightstand. *And if that doesn’t work, try a Guinness and a half dozen cheese dogs.*

The telephone pealed shrilly and Jae fumbled for her cell before she realized it was the one on the nightstand. “Hello?”

“Is this Ms. Cavanaugh?”

“Yes,” she answered. *What in the world?*

“I’m the bartender at Tucker’s. Do you know a Ms. Lewis?”

TWELVE

Jae could see Reed slumped in the corner of a high-backed booth. The leather was worn and cracked, but looked homey rather than tacky. Large wooden posts held up the rough-hewn timber ceiling joists and wrought iron candleholders illuminated the walls. She made her way across the empty floor, careful not to disturb the chairs that were resting on the tabletops.

“Hey.”

Reed looked up but remained silent, her expression unchanged.

“Tough night?” Jae asked.

No reply. The actress just shrugged her shoulders into her jacket and stood away from the booth.

“My mother used to give me the silent treatment when I was a kid. Hated it. Hating having to guess what I’d done wrong. If you’re mad at me, tell me; then we can deal with it.” Jae led the way back through the bar.

“S’m not mad,” Reed slurred. “S’drank.”

“No. Really?”

“Smartash.”

“Yep,” Jae agreed happily. “But I’m your smartass.”

“S’ttrue?”

Jae opened the car door and nodded at the bartender. “Thanks.” Reed had forgotten her question and was wrestling with the seat belt, finally claiming victory after successfully pinning the clasp against the buckle and sliding them together.

“No problem.” The young man went back inside and locked the door behind him, shaking his head in amusement at the actress’ antics.

Jae could see why he had been reluctant to kick a drunk Reed out of the bar. Nice bar; bad neighborhood. “C’m on, Roo. Let’s get you home.”

They rode in silence, insulated from the noise of the road by thick glass and from each other by timid curiosity. Twenty minutes later the driver pulled up in front of the hotel. Jae waited for him to come around and open the door, so that he could help get Reed out of the car if necessary.

Reed eased herself out of the car and paced deliberately toward the elevator.

“Wow. You must have one Hades of a metabolism.”

The actress turned from the wall. “Hell, Jae. Just say hell.”

"Can't. Promised my grandmother I wouldn't swear."

"You promised your ... grandmother?"

"Yep. In the fourth grade." She guided Reed into the elevator and hit the button for their floor.

"So what happened tonight then?"

If I were going to swear, now would be the time. The elevator stopped, and gave a small jerk as gravity caught up with them. Jae mulled over what to say, deciding to stick to plan A. "I got wrapped up in cutting the film and forgot. It was just taking shape so perfectly and next thing I knew ..." she snapped her fingers, "it was after midnight. I should have called. For that, I'm sorry."

"Happens to me too, when I'm working with clay."

It was Jae's turn to be surprised. "Clay?" Reed appeared, at least on the surface, way too mercurial to be someone who could work with clay. *It's the first personal detail I haven't had to pry out of her with a 2x4 though. Next she'll be telling me she likes hominy and grits.*

"So, what's your story, Morning Glory?" She pushed the door open and motioned for the actress to precede her. Reed blushed and looked down at the floor. *Oh boy, this is going to be good,* thought Jae.

"... argument ..." the actress mumbled, "... dyke ... kiss ... mad at, left."

"You had an argument?" Jae prodded. "With who?" *And how does it involve a dyke and a kiss? Or do I even want to know?*

"Holly."

"You argued with Holly about the kiss? It's a little late for a re-write on the book."

"Different kiss, in the bar."

"Tucker's?"

"Rumours." Reed was striving to shed her shoes, having finally gotten out of her coat.

"Rumours?" Jae knew that if she went and looked in the mirror, her eyes would be as round as saucers. She couldn't begin to imagine how they had ended up in a gay bar, though Holly did have a slightly warped sense of humour.

"It's a women's bar."

She resisted the impulse to comment, "You don't say?", but opted instead to simply ask, "Why?" As a precaution she sat on the bed, and made room when Reed joined her.

"The Kiss."

"Roo."

“What?”

“Stick to acting, you’d make a lousy screenwriter.”

“Everyone’s a critic.”

Reed didn’t continue, and they sat in silence until Jae couldn’t take it any more. “Okay, I’ll bite. What about The Kiss?” She could hear the capital letters.

“I wanted to find out if I could do it.”

“And?”

“And I had an argument with Holly.”

Jae was positive Reed was trying to drive her insane. “You tried to kiss Holly?”

The actress shook her head. “No.”

“Maribel?”

Reed leaned over conspiratorially and whispered, “Maribel is straight.”

Jae could smell the mix of sandalwood, cigarette smoke and bar air that clung to the actress. It was all she could do not to turn her head slightly and breathe it in again. Instead she savoured the faint scent that lingered between them. “So who did you try to kiss?”

“No one.”

She ran her fingers through her hair and counted to ten. Backwards. Slowly. Twice. Trying to figure out the next question to ask, she looked up at Reed and found the other woman regarding her speculatively. “What?” she ventured.

“Would you do that one with me, too?”

“What one?” This time she was deliberately not replying to the question being asked. *Favourite fantasy and worst nightmare, all rolled into one neat predicament.*

“The Crandon Beach scene.”

“I need to go to the bathroom. Excuse me.” Jae bolted for the safety of the bathroom and locked the door behind her. *Oh boy.* Her internal narrator provided not so subtle encouragement to balance her conscience. She turned on the cold water tap, and splashed a handful across her face, running the excess into her hair with her fingers to dry them off. *C’mon, it’s not like you haven’t thought about it. No harm, no foul. You kiss her, get your questions answered, she gets hers answered and you get to safely get her out of your system. She-ah right.*

Without thinking about it she brought her hands to her face and threw a jab, then two more. In the mirror her target ducked away from the next combination, so Jae countered with a jab, cross, hook. The

bathroom was too small for legwork but she balanced her body over her knees and took up the rhythm.

Jab. Cross.

Jab. Cross.

Tell her? Jab. Cross.

Don't tell her? Jab. Cross.

Jab. Cross. *Tell her?*

Jab. Cross. *Don't tell her?*

Jab. Cross. Jab. Cross. Jab. Cross.

Her muscles were loosening, and she settled into an easy cadence.

Kiss her? Jab. Cross.

Kiss her not? Jab. Cross. Hook.

Jab. Cross. Hook. *Kiss her?*

Jab. Cross. Hook. *Kiss her not?*

Kiss her. Jab. Cross. Hook. *Tell her?*

Jab. Cross. Hook. *Tell her not.*

She threw a few more combinations, finishing up the light work out with a flurry of hooks. "Reed's going to think I died in here." Jae splashed a little more water over her face to cool down the skin. Her reflection gazed back at her mockingly. "It's just a rehearsal kiss, Jae. Get over it."

Right, a rehearsal kiss. Then why do I feel like a nervous teenager before the prom? How would you know, you never went to your prom, remember? Yeah. Now let me think. That little voice could be so annoying. *Where's the rehearsal line, m'grrl hunh? You should be making her rehearse with Gwen.* Jae turned the tap off and patted her face dry. "Be a moot point once we are back in LA. I'll be too busy. This is a one shot deal."

Yeah. Right, commented her inner cynic. "And not while she's drunk."

Jae exited the bathroom, and turned off the light behind her. "Sorry about that, Reed."

There was no answer from the tall woman. While she had been thinking, Reed had crawled under the covers and was out like a light.

"No problem, I'll just sleep in her bed." Jae grabbed her pillow, then made for the connecting door. Locked. Reed must have locked it earlier, and they had come in through Jae's room. That left her two choices—dig through Reed's pocket to find her room key or crawl in next to her.

"Some choice." Risk trouble now, or later. She eyed the bed with a mixture of apprehension and appraisal. "Big enough. But I'm keeping my clothes on." Gingerly, she slid under the covers and pulled them up around her.

Reed's scent drifted across the slight gap between their bodies and Jae considered that maybe the floor would make a good option three. She closed her eyes and tried to keep from imagining what it would be like to kiss the woman sprawled beside her. If it had been hard before, now that she was actually going to do it—it proved next to impossible. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

The inside of her skull felt like it was trying to escape through her stomach. *What was that old adage? Liquor, beer—never fear; beer, liquor—never sicker.* Gingerly, Reed opened one eye. *So far, so good.* The hotel room was still dark, the drawn curtains keeping out the morning light. The sound of soft breathing made her turn her head. Jae was curled up in a ball, back pressed against a pillow that separated their bodies.

Their flight out wasn't until later, and they had no filming or other work scheduled this morning, so Reed closed her eye and settled back into the bedclothes, careful not to move her head too much.

I went out and did this—why? Because you're chickenshit, she thought uncharitably. Her bladder refused to allow her to remain where she was, and Reed forced her body upright. Not as bad as she'd feared. A little nausea, but otherwise her limbs seemed to be in working order. It wasn't until she reached for her toothbrush that she realized that she was in Jae's room instead of her own. A quick search turned up the courtesy toiletries, and she unwrapped the monogrammed OralB. Memories of the night before began to filter through the departing hangover haze.

Fuck Holly. Who the hell does she think she is anyway? Right. And Maribel? What's your excuse for her, Sunshine? Face it. You like Holly, and now you're pissed-off that she called you on something. But she's still a dyke.

So?

Maybe dykes—lesbians—aren't all predators. Reed slammed the thought back down. *And pigs fly.*

Really?

The ice-cold water jarred her further away from things she didn't want to think about and Reed splashed more onto her face, driving away the last remnants of drunkenness. What she really needed was a shower. Quietly crossing the dark room, she moved past the bed and a still slumbering Jae, and turned the handle on the connecting door. Locked.

How in the hell did that happen? The door was locked from the other side, Jae's doorknob rotated easily in her hand. Without warning, the image of another door replaced the wooden one in front of her. Disoriented, she fell, the vertigo combined with the déjà vu too hard to combat. She half expected to find herself falling through the floor, her nightmare made real. The shock of the hard carpet startled her. "Ungh!"

The room slowly reasserted itself over the vision from her dreams. *That hasn't happened in a long time.*

"Reed?"

"What?"

"Why are you sitting on the floor?" The director's voice was still heavy with the Sandman's touch.

"I should think it's obvious. I'm inspecting the carpet for hidden cameras."

"Smart aleck."

Reed stood and returned to the bed, sitting on one corner. "Yeah, but to quote a friend of mine, I'm your smart aleck."

Jae laughed, her tousled hair flat on one side from where she had been sleeping on it.

"Not so loud," Reed winced.

"Headache?"

"No, hangnail."

"My, my, we are in a mood this morning." Jae sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. "Don't suppose you could explain to me what happened last night in a format I can understand?"

"Nothing."

"At least tell me what kind of damage control I'm going to have to do with my screenwriter."

"It's between me and Holly."

"No, Reed, you're wrong. If it affects the movie, it's also about me."

She hadn't thought of that. That by damaging her relationship with Holly she might also be impairing Jae's with the writer. "Not about the movie. It's personal."

"Okay."

"Can I ask you something?" Reed ventured. Jae's question had reminded her of something else from last night.

"Sure."

"Did you say yes or no?" The director didn't seem to be treating her any differently this morning, so that had to be a good sign.

"Lawks a mercy, Mizz Lewis, you done slept in ma bed an now you

be askin if'n it's alright to be kissin on me?"

Despite the pain that flared in her head, Reed couldn't help but laugh at Jae. "Oh God. That hurts."

"Seriously though, yes, I'll help you rehearse. But look at me for a second, will you?"

Reed's stomach clenched in apprehension. "What?" she asked warily, even as she turned to face the blonde.

"It's just a kiss. A small simple peck. There are much more difficult scenes coming up. Put this one in perspective and just go with it. And keep in mind that it will be about as intimate as pitcher's mound at a Dodgers game."

"You think I'm being stupid?"

"No. Stupid is not a word I would associate with you. All I mean is that you shouldn't be putting all of this pressure on yourself over this scene. That's why we are flying down and shooting it now—to get it out of the way." Green eyes were fixed on her solemnly.

"Thanks, I think."

"Look, I know this is hard for you. I'll do what I can to help, but Reed, this is a movie about two people in love. That means you and Gwen have to sell it—in your body language, tone of voice—everything."

"This film is important to you, isn't it?" Reed moved the topic out of dangerous territory back to something she felt she could handle.

"Yes." Jae paused. "It's my shot at making a film that matters and that is mainstream. You don't get many chances like that in Hollywood. If I blow it, I won't get another one this side of Armageddon."

Reed nodded. Jae had as much professionally at stake here as she herself did. "Just a peck, hunh?"

"Just a peck."

THIRTEEN

The airport was crowded, and the five of them wound their way past throngs of overdressed Midwestern tourists and underdressed Northern ones. Finally they found the gate that their charter would leave from. More crewmembers were already at the gate, and Reed watched Jae greet her temporary assistant and the Director of Photography.

"How's the head?" Holly asked.

Surprised, Reed looked at the author. She hadn't spoken to Holly all day, nor had the other woman seemed inclined to break the silence. "Ask me after the plane takes off," she answered wryly. *Does Holly expect me to apologize? Go ahead, it'll help Jae.* "Look, about last night. I shouldn't have sworn at you." That was as far as she could go right now. Reed couldn't think how to phrase what she knew she should really say.

"No problem."

They stood in silence as Maribel and Gwen chatted across from them, while Jae continued to lay down last minute details and plan the shooting schedule for Miami.

Her stomach fluttered nervously as she looked at the director. In spite of Jae's claim about the insignificance of the kiss that they would rehearse tonight, Reed couldn't get it out of her mind. *How did one kiss a woman anyway? Was it just like kissing a guy—only with less facial hair? How would Jae react to having to kiss a woman? Be freaking great if she ends up throwing up all over me.* As though aware Reed was thinking of her, Jae turned and met her gaze, smiling slightly. Her expression was soft and reassuring, and Reed smiled back.

"Hey, Gwen," Reed greeted her co-star, willing to try a little cordiality.

Gwen turned and smiled.

Reed found herself looking over a young man's shoulder to where Jae was standing. The blonde director was animatedly drawing pictures in the air with her hands, and Reed watched raptly. *Is Jae as nervous about this as I am?* All morning her stomach had been doing backflips. At first Reed had chalked it up to the hangover, but it seemed, like now, to happen mostly when she was thinking about tonight, or looking at the director. And that worried her. She trusted Jae, but the last thing she wanted to have happen was to get sick or do something else stupid.

What? Like your first kiss? That had been a disaster. Jimmy Blake had walked her home from school every night for a week, finally stretching

up to kiss her while they had been standing on her mother's front porch. The novelty of having a boy pay attention to her had outweighed the initial discomfort. She'd been scared, and excited and nervous all at once. She'd gotten a nosebleed and that had been that. Jimmy's shirt had borne the brunt of her nervous reaction, and he had never again walked her home or tried to kiss her.

It hadn't felt like that at all last night in the bar, Reed remembered. Jae ran her hand through bangs again, then made her way back to where the actress was standing, stopping first to greet Gwen's friend.

"Hey."

"Hey, back," Reed acknowledged the greeting.

"Cait has cars booked to pick us up and take us to the hotels, but the DP and I will be heading straight for Crandon. I want to get a look at it during sunset and twilight. I'll see you after that, okay?"

"Sure." Reed shrugged in an attempt to have the remark seem offhanded.

"Cool."

Was Jae blushing? The stewardess came out and announced that the captain was ready for them. Reed trailed along after the director and wished she knew what the other woman was thinking.

* * *

Jae swung into the front right window seat of the small ATR Turboprop commuter plane. There were lots of empty seats, and she knew Reed would want to settle her long frame into one by herself. Still, she couldn't help but look up hopefully when Reed entered the aircraft.

Reed arched a brow and grinned. "All right, Tigger." The actress tucked her travel bag in the overhead bin above the empty front seat across the aisle, then buckled her coat into one of the unoccupied places, reserving it. Finished, she sat down next to the director.

"Thanks."

"No problem." The seat belt clicked shut sharply, and Reed wiggled slightly, getting comfortable.

They sat in silence for a bit, until the stewardess began to do the pre-flight safety lecture. The engines whined and Jae could feel the plane shake in anticipation. Power surged through the metal frame as they began to taxi along the runway.

It was always worse in smaller planes, and it didn't help that another commuter flight had gone down during take-off a couple of days before.

She turned to Reed, and her breath caught in her throat. The actress had her head back against the headrest, eyes closed. Sunlight from the open portals to either side of them framed her profile, lighting her strong features. The contrast of light and dark was incredible, and if she had harboured any doubts about how physically attractive she found Reed Lewis, they were immediately dispelled.

Reed's hand closed over hers, and this time Jae allowed their fingers to intertwine, squeezing back gently. "I really, really hate take-offs." The effects of zero g nailed her, and her stomach lurched in response. At last the plane leveled out and she let go of Reed's hand. The actress unbuckled and moved to the seat she had reserved.

The flutter in Jae's stomach didn't leave with the other woman or with the arrival of cruising altitude. *Oh boy. This is worse than a real date. Forbidden fruit, Jae.*

Jae looked over. Reed had reclined in her seat, back tilted against the window, legs stretched out on the other seat. Her laptop was out and she was busily tapping on the keys. Jae turned her own attention back to the script, in an attempt to get up to speed on what had been covered back in LA.

Every so often she would glance over, occasionally meeting Reed's eyes as she did. They would exchange shy smiles then go back to their respective tasks. *Is she thinking about tonight?* The smell of warm sandalwood mingled with vanilla hung in the air, and Jae let her mind drift along the currents. *Wonder if there's a market for that scent. I know I'd buy it.*

The hint of sandalwood grew stronger and Jae opened her eyes to find herself looking up into Reed's indigo ones. *Amazing how they change colour—sometimes so pale and cold, and at others deep and warm.* She held the actress' eyes for a long heartbeat, meeting the curious scrutiny without flinching. Reed curved a corner of her lip, in what for the actress was the equivalent of a full grin, and sat down, exchanging the visual contact for a physical one as she allowed Jae to take her hand in preparation for landing.

The plane could have dropped out of the sky at that moment for all Jae cared. Whether or not their relationship ever went any further than this instant, she knew with a devastating certainty that she had, against all the odds, found a friend who balanced her. It was the scariest, most exhilarating thing she had ever felt, and it was all she could do to keep the hysterical laughter from welling up and spilling out into the cabin.

"Hey, you okay?" Reed asked.

She let an ear-splitting grin sweep across her face. "I'm glad we became friends."

The actress looked startled, then looked down at their joined hands and applied a gentle pressure. "Me too," she whispered.

FOURTEEN

Mellow didn't begin to describe how she felt. For the first time in as long as she could remember, her shoulders didn't ache. She was still lying on the table, the masseuse having left it behind, a kindness that allowed her to continue floating in the half space between waking and sleep. There was a soft rap, and Reed heaved herself off the table. The sheet trailed behind as she went to answer the door. A quick peek through the eyehole revealed her blonde benefactor, and she moved aside to let Jae in the room.

"They don't connect this time," Jae laughed.

"No, I guess they don't." She'd gotten used to having Jae around. The noise the other woman made as she went about her routine had been curiously comforting. Reed grabbed her sweatpants from the bed and tugged them up over her hips, then dropped the sheet before she added a white cotton shirt. "Thanks." She indicated the long narrow table where her body had received such exquisite attention.

Jae smiled. "I aim to please."

"You have good aim." *Jae is so cute when she blushes, like a kid caught stealing candy.* Her stomach had begun to flutter again, and Reed tried to figure out what to say next. "How'd it go?"

"Good. Provided the weather holds, we'll shoot it tomorrow night."

The 'it' hung between them for a minute and Reed fingered her script. "How'd you know I had the lines down?"

Jae cocked her head sideways, and gave her a 'what-are-you-kidding-me' kind of look. "Reed, if there is one thing I don't have to worry about on this film, it's you knowing your lines."

"Oh."

"It was a compliment. You know we could always rent you a practice partner."

"They have those, for that?"

"This is Miami, Roo. They have everything here."

Reed tightened her grip on the script. *Does this mean Jae doesn't want to do this?* She didn't know what scared her more—kissing Jae, or not kissing her. "I ... I think I'd feel safer with you." There, it was out. It didn't stop the nervous anticipation from clawing its way from her stomach to every limb in her body.

"Right. Let's get this peck over with then, shall we?"

"What? Just like that?"

"Yep." Jae threw her jacket on the bed. "Do you want to do it with the lines or just the kiss first?"

Reed thought about it. Doing it in context would be less weird. She couldn't imagine just leaning down and kissing Jae's soft lips. *Whoa. Where in the hell did that come from? Chill, dummy, she's a woman; of course her lips are going to be softer than a man's.*

Jae watched Reed think, the woman's internal struggle written plainly on her face now that she knew what signs of expression to look for from the actress.

"Umm, as part of the scene, I think." Reed had opened the script to the correct scene and held it out.

"Got it already. I looked at it on the plane." She'd actually learned it by heart while reading the section of the novel. It was, without a doubt one of the mushiest, most romantic things she had ever read. To feel your soul sliding home like that. Wow.

"You start," the actress instructed.

Obligingly, Jae delivered the first line. "Can I ask you something?"

"Does this answer your question?" Reed leaned down and stopped.

Jae could feel the delicate tendrils of air brushing by the fine hair on her cheek. The smell of sandalwood, mixed this time with chamomile, caressed her senses.

The actress straightened up. "I really don't think I can do this. What if I throw up on you or something?"

"Then you're fired."

Reed laughed nervously and tossed the script onto the couch.

"Tell you what, it's a big step, let's try reversing the scene," Jae suggested. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she felt the butterflies churn in her stomach. *Anyone would think I was the one who had never kissed a woman before.* "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Jae moved forward. Then stopped. This wasn't going to work. *Just once I'd like to date or kiss someone shorter than I am. Be able to lean in and kiss them without needing to stand on a stair or wait for them to bend over.* She hopped up onto the masseuse's table. It was, she supposed, almost like sitting on a fence.

Reed looked ready to keel over but had gamely approached the high table and was standing just inside of Jae's parted legs, their bodies almost, but not quite touching.

"Can I ask you something?"

She made the mistake of looking into Reed's eyes as she leaned

forward, the blue pools rising up to swallow her. "Does this answer your question?" Jae breathed the words out, then gently pressed her lips against Reed's. Careful not to push too fast, Jae tenderly increased the pressure, glad she was already seated. The velvet smoothness of Reed's mouth beckoned her and the flutters in her stomach quieted.

Jae pulled back, afraid of her own reaction to the tentatively returned kiss, vaguely disappointed with the loss of gentle contact. Reed still had her eyes closed, and both hands rested lightly on Jae's waist. Looking closer at the slightly stunned actress, a flash of colour caught her eye, "Reed, your nose is bleeding." The director didn't know whether to be flattered or worried.

Blue eyes sprang open and a hand flew to the corner of a sculpted nostril. "My nose is bleeding?" Clearly dumbfounded, Reed didn't move or make any attempt to staunch the flow, and Jae guided her back into the wing chair.

"Don't move. I'll be right back." Jae hurried off to the washroom, and turned the cold water tap on full. *Why are all hotel linens white?* She soaked the cloths thoroughly in the ice cold water then returned to the main room. Reed was holding her nose pinched shut between thumb and forefinger. "Here," she laid one cloth on the back of Reed's neck and the other over her companion's aquiline nose. "Well that's a first," Jae joked.

Reed looked up over the bunched face cloth. "Look on the bright side—I didn't get sick."

"We could always shove cotton up your nose." *That's right, Jae, keep it light.*

Reed didn't reply. Blue eyes were hooded, no longer open, the mask returned. Jae swallowed convulsively, unsure of what to say or do next. Professional detachment won out and she put on her director's cap.

"I think over-rehearsing this scene will take the impact away. Just make sure tomorrow you say Dar's lines." She got up and moved across the room. Something had changed, and as much as Jae wanted to find out if Reed was okay, she didn't dare ask, didn't want to risk facing what she had felt. "Night, Reed."

The door shut behind her with a soft snick and still the actress hadn't moved or spoken. Jae hovered in the hall for a moment, then purposefully strode down the hall, past the door to her room, and entered the elevator.

Reed heard the door shut behind the director. The absence of the woman did nothing to quell the gnawing coldness that was eating at the pit of her stomach. Blood had finally stopped staining the once white cloth crimson and Reed discarded it, the wet thunk as it hit the floor passing unnoticed.

It had been nothing like she'd imagined.

The balcony door slid open soundlessly, and Reed stepped into the night. The wind had picked up and an ebony cloak of hair blew around her face. Palm trees bowed to the battered shore as waves crashed against the hapless beach.

Like with the Nor'westers of her youth, she could smell the storm's ire rising in the night. It would hit hard, and soon, then subside quickly—its fury spent. White caps danced across the ocean's surface before committing suicide against the rocky outcrops. Reed inhaled deeply, the tempest around her a mirror.

She hadn't expected it to feel nice.

When the rain began to fall in heavy sheets, the stinging whips soaked her clothes, and she stepped forward and leaned out against the rail, losing herself in the violent display of nature's temper.

FIFTEEN

“Roll camera.”

“Rolling.”

“Speed.”

As Reed listened to the commands, light flooded into her eyes, so she was unable to see the crew or Jae. In front of her, Gwen also awaited the signal to begin. The blonde actress winked and smiled.

“Can I ask you something?” Gwen, as Kerry, delivered her first line.

This is it. Maybe I should have stuffed cotton wadding up my nose. “Does this answer your question?” Reed leaned down to kiss her co-star, not quite sure that she was up to the confident, self-assured butchy kiss that Jae had explained the scene called for.

“Cut.” Jae’s voice rang through the curtain of invisibility created by the blinding lights. The blonde director stepped into the light, and Reed found herself unable to meet her friend’s eyes. They hadn’t spoken much at breakfast, Jae socializing with Holly and the DP, while she chased her eggs benedict around the plate. Their respective duties had kept them apart and prevented them from talking about last night.

Make-up trailed behind the director and approached Gwen. Finally the blonde’s hair was nailed back into place with a ton of hairspray and four clips to keep any more errant locks from obscuring her expression.

“From the top. Places.” Jae gave them a last cursory inspection then left.

Behind her, the wooden rail of the fence supported her weight, and she rubbed the smooth satiny surface idly. Gwen stepped back to her place and they began the wait for the cue to begin again.

“Can I ask you something?” Gwen had her head bowed slightly, suddenly seeming very shy and nervous.

Playing from the other actress’ cue, Reed reached out to cup Gwen’s chin and tilted her head up. “Does this answer your question?” She ducked her head and felt their lips connect. Reed counted the three that Jae had specified, then pulled back. *That was nothing like last night, it feels like kissing the back of my hand.* She got ready for the next set of lines, pulling Gwen in close.

“Cut.” Jae interrupted the scene again. “That was good, but if you’re going to approach it that way, Gwen, you need to turn a little more to the camera, like this.” The director took the actress’ place, standing just inside of Reed’s open legs.

For the first time since they had practiced the kiss last night, she met Jae's eyes, confused by what she thought she saw. There was no disgust, no anger—and something else she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Can I ask you something?" Jae delivered the line.

This time Reed followed suit and responded, "Does this answer your question?"

A tiny pulse point at the juncture of Jae's throat jumped as her fingers brushed the warm skin before tilting the blonde head up. Just as their lips were about to meet, Jae stepped back and turned to Gwen. "See?"

It was all Reed could do not to pitch forward off the fence, unexpectedly losing her balance as the director moved.

"Got it," Gwen confirmed, once more taking up her mark.

"Great. Everything is fine. The delivery was good, we just need the camera angle." Jae returned to the camera monitor on the other side of the wall of light. The wall visually cut them off from being able to see the crew watch them, which provided the illusion of being alone on the beach.

Unsettled, Reed watched her friend walk away. Distracted, she missed her cue. Angry with herself for the error, the actress pushed away all other thoughts and concentrated on the task at hand, determined to nail it in the next take.

"Reset places." Film continued to roll. "Action."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Does this answer your question?" Instead of soft lips, hard points met her mouth and Gwen darted her head to the side, biting Reed on the neck.

"No, my question had to do with dinner." Gwen stood back, fake fangs dripping stage blood. Around them Reed could hear the crew erupt in laughter.

"Cut." In an accidental parody of an avenging angel Jae stood in the halo of light, green eyes flashing in mirth.

Deliberately, Reed got down off the fence and stepped around the still laughing actress. She came even with the director and then moved past the younger woman. Her trailer was at the end of the row, and Reed let her legs eat up the distance.

"Reed," Jae shouted from behind her, "it was just a joke, lighten up."

She stopped then turned, her voice low and even. "No."

"You can't just walk off—"

"The hell I can't. I just did. Now deal." Reed spun on her heel and continued to her trailer. She roughly closed the brass catch, locking the

door behind her.

Jae stopped, stunned. Things had been going fine. They had even gotten as far as the end of the scene three times, both kisses printable in all three of them, but not quite what she was looking for. Reed hadn't thrown up, there had been no nosebleeds, and the weather had held.

"Jae. I'm sorry." Gwen had come up behind her, the offending fangs now in her hand.

"I think you need to tell her that. But I'd wait a bit. It was funny, but this wasn't a good scene to pull that with."

"You going to let her get away with that?"

"Yes. Just like I'm going to let you get away with what you did—this time." Jae tried to decide whether to go talk to Reed or wait.

"Oh."

An aide scurried up to them. "Miss Cavanaugh?"

"What?" She was still watching the trailer.

"What do you want the crew to do?"

"Take a break. We'll restart at the morning twilight." It meant another long night, but the light was gone.

The crew evaporated, and Gwen disappeared into her trailer. Only the three site security guards remained to keep the director company. Now that the sounds of a film under production had ceased, Jae could hear the pounding surf and the cries of sea birds. She removed her shoes and rolled up her pant legs and crossed to the sandy expanse of Crandon Beach.

The cool sand felt nice between her toes and she made for the water line, nostalgic for the beach below her house. Her shirttails flapped in the stiff breeze, and she could feel the salt-laden wind move through her hair. Water lapped at her toes and the wet mud gave gently under her weight. Moonlight reflected from the ocean, splintered then refracted in a kaleidoscope of patterns as the roiling waves caught the moonbeams and played with them.

Lost in thought, Jae wandered along the length of the deserted beach. *You nearly let her kiss you again. You wanted her to.* Her mind trailed back to the previous evening, even though she knew she should be worrying about the lost filming time. That kiss had changed everything and somehow she had to fix it, repair their relationship.

Except she had no idea what was wrong. *Had Reed felt it too? Was that why she got all quiet?* For an instant her heart skipped a beat wondering if the actress had experienced the same sense of peace that she had. "Right, and that's why her nose bled."

A large driftwood log was beached upon the shore, and Jae sat down, leaning against it. *Would Reed's friendship, assuming I can fix this, be enough? It'll have to be, won't it?* It certainly brought up an interesting question though. One she had contemplated over several beers in the bar the night before.

Does a sexual relationship define soulmates? She'd always thought so, but now ... now she wasn't so sure. With Reed she felt a freedom that she had never had before. Sure the actress was volatile—tonight was just a reminder of something she'd known all along.

Maybe that had been her problem. Jae couldn't remember the last girlfriend that she had had that she had actually been friends with. Most of her relationships started between the sheets, and a few had ended there.

* * *

Reed put the book down, letting it hang open from the edge of the table. Someone continued to knock on the door. The only problem with walking off a set was that you had to walk back on again. The actress wondered whom Jae had sent to cajole her out of the trailer. It wasn't appropriate for the director herself to come, of course, but that didn't stop Reed from hoping. The brass lock turned with a soft click, and she swung the door open.

"What?"

Gwen stood at the bottom of the trailer steps, collar of her jacket turned up against the wind blowing in from the ocean. "Can we talk? Or would you rather just use this?" She held up a wooden stake.

"That's a tough one." Reed made no move to let her co-star in.

"So it's going to be a long nine weeks, if we can't sort this out."

"Yep."

"Why are you being such a bitch?"

"Moon's in Sagittarius." She stepped back and moved inside without shutting the door behind her. After a few seconds Gwen followed. "So talk."

"Don't waste words do you?"

"Or time."

"Touché," the blonde actress acknowledged. "Would it help if I apologized?"

"Maybe."

"Look, Reed. It was a joke. I just wanted to lighten stuff up a bit. I

remember what my first scenes like that were like. They just went on and on, and it wasn't us, it was lighting or makeup or a thousand other things that can go wrong in a shot, but it got to us anyway. So I figured I'd take the edge off."

Reed turned the explanation over in her mind. It had been getting tense, and she knew she'd been angry even before Gwen pulled her little stunt. Was it worth starting a war over? She looked out toward the water. Jae was out there somewhere. She had seen the director go that way, watching her from behind the curtain. It wouldn't be the first picture she had filmed without getting along with cast or crew.

She didn't want this to be another of those films. "All right."

"Then we're cool?"

"We're cool." Reed waited until Gwen was out of the door before continuing. "Gwen..."

The younger woman turned expectantly.

"Paybacks are a bitch."

"I'm counting on it." The blonde's smile matched the humour in her own voice.

SIXTEEN

“Chappelle residence, Heidi speaking.”

“Hey,” Reed greeted her friend.

“What did you do this time?”

“Nothing.”

“Have you seen the Enquirer? ‘Ice Queen remains unmelted—Actress Reed Lewis has returned to Hollywood, but even the charm of the Magic Kingdom hasn’t melted the statuesque actress.’ There’s more.”

“I bet.”

“So what happened?”

“Nothing.” She shifted the phone to her other ear. “Rio around?”

“Geoff took him into town to pick up Finnegan. He needed shearing.”

“How is he?”

“Finnegan’s fine,” Heidi deadpanned.

“Not the sheep. Rio.”

“He’s fine. Heart’s good and his lungs are still clear, so I think he’s kicked this one completely. Zerafa wants to see him next week. Any chance you’ll be able to get back for it?”

Reed relaxed. Every bout with pneumonia brought an increased risk that Rio’s heart would be overtaxed and the artificial valve would burst. “No, but I talked to someone. She gave me info on getting the video uplink to work. When is it scheduled for?” The meeting with the cardiologist would determine whether or not Rio would be a candidate for the program and Holly’s help would let her participate—even from Los Angeles.

“Wednesday at one. Let me know what I need to do on this end. Though you’ll have to get Rio to do the tough bits.”

“Wimp.”

“Ayup. And technology is no place for wimps.”

“I’ll call later, maybe from Houston.”

“I’ll tell him. So, how are you?”

“Fine. I need to go. They’re calling my flight.”

“Reed, don’t let ’em get to you, okay?”

“Rolls right off. Bye.”

“Bye.”

The phone went dead, and Reed folded it up and put it back into her pocket. The actress hung back, letting the other passengers board first.

“Everything okay?” Jae inquired, startling her.

“Yeah.” Reed gave her the same line she’d given Heidi.

“Coming?” Things were still awkward between them.

Reed nodded and followed the director to the gate.

“This is the final boarding call for Continental Airlines flight 1701, Miami to Houston. Final boarding call for Continental flight 1701.”

The stewardess took their boarding passes and waved them down the long white painted corridor. Silence prevailed as they walked side by side. At the entrance, Jae stopped and looked over shyly. Reed raised a brow, quizzically. It appeared neither wanted to go first.

Jae wiggled her brows, green eyes glinting with mischief and held up a closed fist.

Reed played along, recognizing the game. “One.”

“Two.”

“Three,” Jae called unexpectedly, a trifle ahead of the count.

Caught off guard, Reed left her hand curled in a fist, and Jae wrapped her smaller hand around it.

“Paper beats rock. You go first.”

“Cheater.”

“Strategist,” Jae pronounced solemnly, then winked, and Reed knew they would work it out.

That was neat, she thought to herself. That they could do that: a look, or a smile and it was okay, or at least not the end of the line. Reed was pretty sure she was in for one of Jae’s sensitive chats, but it looked like she had ducked the two-by-four this time.

Reed had to move past her seat to let the blonde slide into the one by the window. She shook her head at the director, but didn’t point out the obvious—that if Jae had the inside seat, she should have gotten on the plane first. It was a pleasant surprise to find that they were once again sitting together. She’d been afraid it was a privilege given up with her temper tantrum.

The aircrew finished their pre-flight checks of overhead bins and mouthed along with the safety lecture, while she watched Jae surreptitiously. The blonde looked like hell. There were dark circles under her eyes, and to Reed, used to judging pallor, the younger woman looked wan. Before she could look away, Jae turned her head slightly, catching her. It could only have been for a few seconds but to Reed it felt far longer, their eyes meeting in silent search. She ducked away first, raking a hand through her unbound jet locks in unconscious imitation of the director’s signature gesture.

“What happened with you and Gwen?”

After filming, they had ridden to the airport in a limo with an entertainment reporter for the Miami Herald, so they hadn't been able to talk—though she had noticed Jae watching them with slight puzzlement.

"Nothing."

"Ri-ight." Jae drew the word out in disbelief.

"We talked."

"And?"

Reed grinned, a wicked gleam of her own lighting her blue eyes. "And I told her paybacks were a bitch."

"You didn't?" Jae choked out over the gasps of laughter.

"Yep."

"Promise me something?"

"What's that?"

"A warning."

"Deal."

"That reminds me," Jae said, shifting in her seat to face Reed, "gotta put my director's hat on for a minute."

Reed swallowed nervously. The plane shuddered under them and lurched forward as it began to move up the runway.

"Hold that thought." The director grabbed the armrest next to the window, knuckles showing white.

"How about I hold this instead?" Reed reached over and folded Jae's hand inside her own, the director's acceptance of the now familiar gesture tangible evidence that nothing fundamental or important had changed between them.

"Deal." The blonde squeezed their joined hands lightly, adding to the message.

Reed leaned back, letting the warmth of the contact wash over her. It had been so unexpected, and part of her knew it was dangerous to let Jae too close. But she couldn't help it. *Yeah, right, like you have a choice. Face it, Roo, she's already breached the wall.* Once it would have scared her shitless—now it made her smile. And when Jae didn't release her hand immediately upon the plane leveling out, instead adding her other one to the clasped tangle of fingers, one thumb tracing circles lightly on the back of the actress' hand, she didn't panic. Reed just waited, confident that whatever Jae was going to say it wouldn't mean the loss of a friendship.

"Never again, Reed. Next time you walk off my set, it had better be for a good reason—not a reaction to a prank."

“Okay,” she quietly agreed.

* * *

That had gone better than she thought it would. Reed hadn’t apologized, and in truth, Jae hadn’t expected her to. Aware that she was still holding the actress’ hand, she gave one last squeeze and released it. She sorted through the tasks in her mental pending tray; there was so much to do before filming began in earnest.

One nice thing about being stuck on an airplane—Chambers couldn’t call. Cait had phoned earlier in the morning, giving her a heads up that news had traveled fast, and the executive producer had heard about the problems during filming at Crandon. And not just Chambers had heard. Hard Copy had run a story matching the article from Saturday’s Enquirer.

The Enquirer article was no big deal—as long as Reed didn’t get bent out of shape about it. But once the television newsrags picked up the scent of blood on a film set, they wouldn’t let go; Jae knew they’d be circling for more gossip soon. The last thing any of them needed was to have every minor disagreement splashed across the small screen every night.

“Reed?”

“Hmm?”

“Can your laptop do the email thing from up here?”

“Yes. Do you have your pop and smtp info?”

“My what?”

“The path to where your mail is kept. Usually by your ISP—internet service provider.” As she spoke, Reed unhooked the Skyphone from its cradle and pulled the laptop out from under the seat.

Jae fished in a pocket of her backpack and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper that Cait had given her. “Is this it?” She handed it over, getting a small smile in return.

Reed began booting up and skillfully inserted the modem cord into the jack, long tapered fingers sure in their movements. A beep and the screen sprang to life, welcoming them to the world of Windows ’98. A few keystrokes and Netscape Navigator opened; a few more and Reed speedily entered the email information. The computer chimed again and Reed looked over at her. “You need to enter your password.” The machine was turned in her direction.

“It’s not on the paper?”

"Not unless your password is Cavanaugh."

"That would be it."

Reed shook her head and entered the word. "That's worse than Rio."

"What's Rio's?"

"Can't tell you."

Jae thought about what little Reed had said about her son and ventured a guess. "Password?"

Reed laughed and nodded. "Yep."

"Cait told me I couldn't use my first name—it didn't have enough letters."

The actress rolled her eyes, humour rather than disdain showing through. "Last bit—credit card. It can get expensive."

"Money is no object." She handed over her Visa and Reed slid it into the slot on the back of the phone, then removed it.

"You're up and running."

The fold-out table dropped neatly into place and Jae took the laptop from Reed and gingerly set it down. "Thanks."

She watched her email download. *Two hundred and fifteen messages—you'd think I was on one of those mailing list thingys.* Caitlynn had convinced her to subscribe to some sort of women's list. The mail had cycled—and not just in volume. She'd opted to lurk, but remained fascinated by the community. There was a movie or, at the very least, a documentary in the phenomenon. Or maybe a dissertation.

There were three messages from Cait and she opened the first one.

Hey, Babe

I've got some good news for you and some bad.

You can choose which to read first. :-)

Side note - Mar called, they want to know if you can join them for the Pediatric AIDS Benefit.

C

Jae chuckled and clicked on the tiny envelope whose subject line read "The Good News."

You opened this first didn't you?

Righto....

The good news is you're almost home.

C

"Oh, oh," she exhaled. *This, m'grrl, is not boding well.*

"Hey?" Reed was looking over at her, brow raised questioningly.

"S'okay. Just Cait's sense of humour."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Liar." The actress hadn't dropped her eyes, and Jae held her gaze, losing her worries in the warmth.

"It's okay, really."

"Jae, you look like shit."

"You say the most romantic things." It was out before she could stop it.

"Yeah well, I'm your friend, not your date. Give."

"All right." Jae thought about what to say. The actors were supposed to be kept away from the politics and problems of shooting, but how could she expect Reed to be open with her, if she didn't reciprocate? Not that she thought the actress would be interested in the technical end of things anyway. "It's like this, Reed ... the only thing that travels faster than light is the speed of rumour in Hollywood—and the fastest travelling rumours are the ones about problems on the set."

"I'm sorry." Reed looked pensive.

"It happens." Jae shrugged, caught a little off guard by the unexpected apology. She looked down at the screen and manipulated the mouse pointer until it was over the yellow envelope marked 'The Bad News.'

* * *

"It's a trade-off, Cavanaugh." Rod Chambers leaned back in his chair, one hand waving in the air.

"Right. My integrity for your pocketbook." She had barely been back in LA two hours and had already been arguing in circles with the executive producer for one of them.

"Don't look at it like that. It's the same material, just shot differently."

"Shoot it differently, and it's not the same material."

"Bottom line—I'll let the rest of what you did with the script remain—but ..." he paused and leaned forward, "you need to include some sex. Look at it as a challenge. How erotic can you make it?"

Jae knew it was the best she was going to get out of Chambers. He was the executive producer, and it was his money on the line. She tried one last protest. "This isn't *Bound*."

"No. It's not. But it's not an independent art film either. Welcome to the land of compromise."

Grimly she stood. "All right." She turned to leave.

"I have every confidence in you.... I'm told you have ... experience with the subject matter."

She hadn't thought it was common knowledge, but she wasn't going to deny it either. "Does that mean you'll trust my judgement on how far is too far?"

"This is Hollywood—there is no such thing as too far. But I'll trust you to make it erotic versus pornographic. You may not believe this, but I'm as interested in making this a good film as you are."

This time when she turned to leave, he didn't stop her. Jae couldn't decide if she was mad at having the script altered or excited at the possibility of being able to show something on film that no one else had dared to do. Chambers had hit her right where she lived—in the excitement of telling a story, in presenting images and emotions and connecting with an audience.

The only way to pull it off was to change it. The subplot about Kerry's eating disorder had been cut already. Instead they had opted for subtle conversation around exercise in a couple of 'get to know you' scenes. Two hours simply hadn't been enough time to tell the whole story. The first time would have to come on the heels of the kiss—no dinner, no movie.

There was some dialogue there that she wanted to keep, though. And the popcorn thing. That was good. Maybe they didn't have to lose the movie. On auto-pilot, Jae entered her office and grabbed her notebook.

What if we re-shot the end of the Crandon Beach scene? The blue mechanical pencil danced over her knuckles as she twirled it around absently. "That could work." She sketched the layout of the set for Kerry's living room and pondered the arrangement. "Keep the couch, keep the popcorn—lose Sunday. Works for me."

Lighting would be key. Shadow and suggestion—that was how to go.

"Now where did I put that script?" As usual, the gargoyle didn't answer and she was left to search for it on her own. "Fat lot of help you are." She finally located the dog-eared and battered tome in her backpack.

Her cell phone chirped, and she dug it out of the front pocket of the brown bag. "Cavanaugh."

"Is that any way to be answering a phone, Jacqueline?"

"Hello, Mother." Jae rolled her eyes at the stone gargoyle and thought it grinned back in sympathy.

"Have you seen Hard Copy? You poor dear," the older woman

clucked.

“It’s a publicity ploy, Mom. That’s all.”

“So Roan didn’t die of a heart attack?”

“What?”

“His next of kin released the cause of death as a heart attack, and the Coroner’s Office is set to release their official report tomorrow. Hard Copy says it was an overdose.”

“Did they say ‘speculate’ or ‘confirm’?” She’d known the official results had been held up pending the notification of next of kin, but surely after nearly two weeks Roan was old news. Besides if it were anything serious, Caitlynn would have heard and warned her. Or Chambers—he would have heard.

“I don’t remember, dear. Your father taped it for you. Let me check.”

Jae could hear her mother moving through the house. Could hear the echo of footfalls as she moved down the hardwood floors of the hall, along with staccato taps as she descended the white maple staircase to the family room. The familiar noises created a mental picture in her mind, almost like she was home again.

“Mother, is Daddy home?”

“No dear, he took the twins to Little League.”

“I hope you got them on the same team this year.” Her sister had thought that putting Alex and Aine on different teams last season would help them with developing their own identities. Instead it had nearly sparked World War Three as competitiveness had replaced co-operation.

“Your father stood in the league office and then finally had to agree to umpire in order to get them drafted together.”

Jae laughed. She could picture her father trying to intimidate the executives, just standing there looking down at them until they gave in. “He must be slipping.”

“I think he likes having an excuse to be there.” The click of the video machine as it finished rewinding came clearly through the phone. “Here it is.”

“Can you turn it up?”

“Hard Copy sources have learned that the Office of the Los Angeles County Coroner plans to release the details of the autopsy performed on Hollywood director Roan Pirsig. These same sources have told Hard Copy exclusively that the toxicology report indicated that Pirsig was carrying a deadly cocktail of booze and drugs in his system when he died. Pirsig was....”

“That’s enough, Mother, thanks.” Just as her mother turned the sound

down, she thought she heard Reed's name and was tempted to have it turned back up again.

"I don't know why you want to hang out with all of those awful people." It was a familiar rant, but tonight she didn't have the energy to listen to it.

"I need to go, Mother." She hit the blue button on her yak bak, sounding the buzzer on the children's toy. Her mother needed a little help saying good-bye sometimes.

"Don't think I've forgotten about Becky, either."

Jae held her hand over the receiver and spoke to her stone companion. "No, that would have been too much to ask, hunh?" Then she spoke to her mother again. "I know. I'll call and we'll talk about it."

"If I leave it to you, we won't talk about it until Christmas."

She wanted to say, 'No, Mother, if I had my way, we'd never talk about it.' The last thing she needed added to the standard lecture about how dangerous it was to live in LA, was a list of her deficiencies as a romantic partner. Instead she opted for the safe route. "Sunday, I promise, okay?"

"That sounds wonderful, dear. What time?"

Can you commit hara kiri with a mechanical pencil? It was still spinning around the knuckles of her left hand, and she looked at it speculatively.

"Around one. Bye, Mother."

"Good-bye, Jacqueline ... and lock your car doors on those freeways."

"Yes, Mother. Night." She hit end before her mother could add to the advice.

Somehow, blocking a sensual and erotic love scene after speaking with her mother seemed incongruous and a little weird. Not to mention that she had to find out what kind of damage control the publicity department was going to have to do.

Drugs. They were all over Hollywood, that she knew. But Roan?

Jae exchanged the cell for the receiver of the phone on her desk, hesitating momentarily before dialing. Busy. The insistent electronic beep of the busy signal sounded at regular intervals, she listened to it for several moments before clicking down on the receiver cradle. *Well let's tackle one I can do something about at least.* She dug out the heavy studio phone book and looked up the MIS support number.

* * *

Caitlynn paced across the small area rug that guarded the couch, the

soft warm weave a startling contrast to the cold wood. The clock revealed the hour to be way later than she should sanely be up worrying about problems on the set.

Chambers had buttonholed Jae the moment she had walked into the studio, and the director had disappeared into the large mahogany appointed corner office of the executive producer. The set itself was already tense as the supporting cast anticipated the arrival of the director and principals.

And now this.

Thom had called and given her a heads up on the next morning's breaking news, news that was already making the rounds of the more sensationalistic television entertainment magazines. *What would Jae want done?* She stopped her back and forth exploration of the small apartment. *Did Jae even know?*

Three quick steps brought her to the low table where the base for the cordless phone sat unobtrusively. No phone. A survey of the room failed to reveal the errant handset, so she simply hit the page button and listened for the tell-tale beep.

"Ah ha." It was between the cushions of the overstuffed green sofa. Cait dialed the familiar number and waited for it to connect. Busy. "Figures," the assistant director spoke to the tiny kitten curled up on the middle cushion. She could picture Jae bent over a ream of loose script pages and pencil sketches, despite her having just returned from Miami.

She slid her coat on and fished her keys out of the basket by the front door. Cait was also willing to bet the director hadn't stopped to eat either. "What do you think furball? Curry or Ribs?"

"Mwrr." A tiny paw batted the air.

"Righto, curry it is. Be good. Mummy'll be back soon." Cait shut the door behind her, locking both bolts, then headed for the elevator that would take her one step closer to the studio.

SEVENTEEN

The door was hot ... she couldn't breathe ... the wooden barrier refused to fall. Behind her the hall disappeared, the floor vanishing as darkness swallowed the light. Panic welled up again, and she was powerless to fight the feeling or the inevitable plunge. She screamed, the sound echoing off the unyielding door. The knob twisted uselessly beneath her frantic fingers, and she made a last desperate thrust in her eternal quest to get through the door. Then it was gone and she felt herself begin to fall, the inky black maw once more claiming her. Her eyes closed in defeat; then suddenly her downward plunge stopped, a hand on her wrist...

Reed lay in bed, chest heaving with the effort to draw a breath. It had changed. For the first time in seventeen years, the dream had changed. Slowly she opened her eyes, letting her pupils gather in the sparse moonlight that shone through the half-shuttered windows of her bedroom. Something had caught her.

Her heartbeat slowed as the terror receded, and Reed swung her feet out from under the duvet. The house was quiet; the only noise filtering through the room came from the city sprawled below the residences that hugged the sides of the Hollywood hills. Light after light came on as she moved from room to room, the kitchen illuminated last. The fridge yielded some eggs and a rasher of bacon along with some Havarti cheese and a tomato.

The skillet was already on the front burner of the stove and she turned the element on, adding a pat of butter to melt under the influence of the heat. Several strips of bacon went into the microwave, the noise filling the room. One-handed, she expertly cracked two eggs, their contents spreading across the bottom of the pan. A return trip to the fridge produced the milk, and she added a dollop to the eggs. A wooden spatula traced lazy circles in the mixture as the yolks blended into the whites and milk. She added some herbs and turned the heat down, letting the omelette cook slowly.

The scent of coffee filled out the aroma of breakfast, as the first switch she had flicked on her way into the kitchen made its contribution. Reed leaned against the counter; the images from her dream intruded into the peaceful morning.

It had changed. And that made it more terrifying. Except that wasn't quite right. It hadn't felt terrifying in the nightmare. Her eyes scanned

the clock—four a.m. She wasn't due at the studio for rehearsals until seven, the late start a reflection of the travelling they had just done.

The microwave beeped and she hit the door release, but left the bacon inside until the eggs were ready. Cheese, tomato and a smattering of pepper were laid out over the golden toast and then she checked the omelette. It was nearly done so she laid the still hot bacon over the other ingredients and added the steaming egg top.

Coffee cup in one hand, plate in the other, Reed made for the breakfast nook. Reserving her attention for the open-faced sandwich in front of her, the actress banished the lingering images and impressions of the nightmare to the recesses of her mind. It was, after all, just one more nightmare.

A little later, red turned to green as the flow control signal gave Reed permission to enter the freeway. The powerful Rover engine throbbed as she guided the 4x4 into the commuter traffic and headed for the film studio. A silver thermos rested against the leather passenger seat, along with her laptop, both buckled in safely.

Jae's spot already contained the silver Saturn when Reed parked her own vehicle in the slot with her name painted on the placard. This morning had been the first breakfast in almost two weeks that she hadn't spent in the director's company. As much as she had missed the solitude while in Miami, she found herself looking forward to seeing Jae.

It was just before six, but the lot was already crawling with actors, crew and oddly, studio security. Jennifer looked up from her desk and nodded at the security guard stationed at the entrance to the corridor that led to Jae's office.

"Morning, Ms. Lewis."

Reed acknowledged the salutation with a small flick of her head and moved into the long corridor. The door to Jae's office was closed so she knocked lightly on the stout oak. There was no answer or sound of movement from within, so she reasoned that the room was unoccupied.

Trepidaciously she reached out and turned the knob, pushing gently, and opened the door slowly. Feeling like an intruder, she walked across the room to the cluttered desk and set the flask among the tangle of paper and pencils.

"How do you think with all of this around you?" The gargoyle perched on the only clear spot on the desk was probably the only one who knew. Or Rio. He seemed to have an affinity for bric-a-brac that rivaled the director's.

Reed turned to leave the room, eyes stopping here and there to examine the objects in the room. Every time she was in the office, new things jumped out at her. On the couch, a blanket covered in Scooby-Doo characters lay in a heap. Over blonde hair.

Jae was sound asleep, food cartons and even more paper strewn about the area rug in front of the low sofa. Tufts of hair poked out from the top edge, and now that she looked closely, Reed could see the steady rise and fall of the coloured material in time to the soft exhalations of the still slumbering woman.

“How late did you work, Tigger?” There was a small kitchenette area in the far corner, equipped with a sink, bar fridge and toaster oven, along with a small cupboard. “If I were a coffee cup, that’s where I would hide.”

On her way across the room she spotted the still unpacked cardboard cartons that Jae had been rooting through last time she’d been there. More books were piled on the far side of the couch. “Maybe not,” she observed. There were lots of places for coffee cups to hide in here.

A huge “Scotty” mug rested in the tiny sink and Reed lifted it out. “Interesting mug for a technophobe.” The red-shirted engineer smiled back cockily, unaware of her comment. It looked clean enough, but a quick rinse under some hot tap water ensured that the mug was both clean and no danger to the temperature of the coffee. Hot coffee in a cold cup seemed to defeat the point of storing it in a thermos.

The seal released with a satisfying pop, the aroma of the rich, dark roast spreading through the room. *Jae was wrong—the smell of coffee spreads faster than rumour or sound.*

She poured a generous serving into the warmed mug and crossed to the couch, taking up a comfortable spot on the floor next to where pale locks peeked at the world. Reed didn’t speak, letting the coffee do its job. Jae began to stir, mumbling inaudibly.

More shifting of the blanket, and a blonde head lifted sleepily. “Tell me I’m not dreaming.”

“You’re not dreaming.”

“Roo?”

“Who were you expecting? The fairy goddess of coffee?”

“Close enough. Thanks.” Jae took the mug, cupping it between her hands, the handle facing away from her, fingers laced together through it. She took a long sip, then leaned back against the armrest, knees up, the blanket tucked around her. “I could get used to this.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” Reed admonished, drinking from her own travel

mug.

“Spoilsport.”

“You sleep here often?”

Jae ruffled her hair, returning it to its pre-sleep state of perpetual disarray. “Seems like.”

“You don’t have to.”

“It’s not that simple.” To Reed, Jae sounded defensive and her hunch was confirmed when the director resumed speaking, having paused to take another swig of coffee. “It’s what I do, and it means long hours.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she clarified, quietly. “You can use my trailer.”

“Oh.” Jae looked down at her cup, finger tracing the rim. “Sorry.”

Reed waited for the other woman to continue and took another sip of coffee. Three sips later Jae spoke again.

“I get a lot of grief about being too dedicated.” The nervous laugh that accompanied the confession told Reed more than the words had.

“Not from me.”

Jae gave her one of the wide-open smiles that lit the green eyes with life and vigour that seemed too large to be contained in such a slight frame. “Thanks.”

They sat and drank their coffee in silent communion. Noises of other people beginning their own work days drifted into the room but didn’t disturb the companionable mood.

* * *

Cait rounded the corner muttering to herself. Jae had broken her promise and hadn’t left the studio after all. The white chalk marks she had put on both the asphalt and her friend’s tire had made it plain that the car hadn’t moved. They had months of filming and post-production work left, and she was afraid that her boss would burn out if she didn’t slow down.

With Jae it was a fine line. Her friend would only tolerate so much nagging or cozening before pushing back. It would be her job, Cait knew, to help Jae manage everything and hopefully keep the intense and driven young woman from burning herself out before the project was completed.

The door to the office she and Jae still shared was unlocked and she entered, mini-rant on the tip of her tongue. “I can’t believe you—” Cait stopped. Jae was sitting on the couch, blanket tucked around her waist,

hands cradling the large Star Trek mug she'd liberated from Cait. But it was the woman sprawled comfortably on the floor at the director's feet that had cut off the lecture—undelivered.

Reed Lewis turned her head and Cait flinched. The actress' eyes were cold and full of challenge, and the relaxed posture stiffened perceptibly. *Now that is interesting.*

"Morning, Cait." Jae greeted her warmly and motioned her to the unoccupied end of the couch. "What can't you believe?"

The actress was watching her intently and the assistant director kept her amusement to herself as she replied. "That you didn't leave me any curry."

Jae laughed and Cait studied the lithe blonde. If the evidence hadn't been in front of her, she wouldn't have guessed that the director had just flown across the country and worked most of the night. The dark circles that had been under her friend's eyes the previous day were all but invisible now.

Out of the corner of one eye she snuck a peek at the actress. Unaware of the observation, her stance had softened a little and the way she looked at Jae was markedly different from what Cait typically associated with the aloof actress.

"Speaking of food, you two up for breakfast?" Jae threw the question out casually, but Cait caught the undercurrent of tension.

The actress shook her head negatively. "Already ate."

"Me too," Cait added, and Jae shot her a dirty look.

"Okay. The direct route then. We have a publicity problem Reed, and it's going to get worse before it gets better."

The actress' reply was to reach up and pour more coffee in Jae's mug.

"Ummm. Thanks." Jae took a sip, then continued, "They're going to release the autopsy report on Roan this morning."

Cait watched the two women. It was like she wasn't even in the room. Reed was focused on Jae, and the director in turn seemed to be trying to find the best way to explain what she needed from the actress without sounding condescending or demanding.

That was it. Cait put her finger on it. Jae wasn't so much briefing Reed as she was conversing with her.

"No. I won't do it, Jae." Reed sounded angry, but it sounded different than the fight the whole studio had overheard the day Roan had died.

Here it comes. Cait readied herself for a flash of her friend's temper. Jae was not one to accept defiance on her set or about issues with her movie.

“Okay.” The director spoke softly. “Then I need you to say nothing at all. Not a word, not a grimace or the slightest smirk. Nothing.”

“And?” Reed prompted, one brow raised.

Cait couldn’t believe it. She looked closer at her friend. *Oh my God, Jae has feelings for the Ice Queen.*

“And you do a photo shoot with Gwen. As Dar and Kerry.”

“Why?” Reed had stood and was poking through the books on the shelf to Jae’s right.

The director pushed the blanket to the side and joined the actress, leaning against the built-in wooden shelf, green pools intently focused on the taller woman. They were only inches apart, yet seemed unaware of their proximity.

Jae didn’t let many colleagues or casual acquaintances inside her personal space, and Cait knew she had never seen anyone within five feet of the actress unless it was part of a scene.

“Because the media will be all over us. With Roan’s cause of death fueling things, we need to pre-empt any hint of discord on the set. At this point I’d rather be dealing with rumours of a set romance, than rumours of catfight.” It was one of the options they had discussed last night.

“Is that all?” The actress had crossed both arms over her chest.

“Nope.” Jae was smiling mischievously. “We’re all going to participate in the Paediatric AIDS Benefit.”

“What?” Cait was surprised and quickly looked at Reed to see what her reaction was. The actress looked stricken.

It was Jae’s turn to fold her arms. “Oh c’mon. It’ll be fun. Everyone will be there.”

EIGHTEEN

“Great. I forgot the towel.” Jae glared at the linen free vanity. It was warm enough that she would dry quickly, the hot Los Angeles sun overpowering the air conditioner. Naked, she padded from the en suite to her room, water droplets tracing a path down her back and torso.

A dark blue sarong patterned with white incandescent suns and scattered stars hung over the end of the cedar bed frame. A half-twist and a tuck and it rested snugly on her hips. The glass of iced tea rested where she’d left it. Icy rings of water had migrated to the table, the pattern marking the papers with the unmistakable stamp of summer. She took a long drink and enjoyed the contrast of cold water against the heat of her bare skin as more droplets escaped and ran down her chest.

The third step from the top creaked under her weight as she descended to the floor below and made her way to the living room to curl up on the linen couch, book in hand. Words wiggled on the page and she gave up trying to make sense of the paragraphs. Restless and full of energy, she got up again and wandered out to the back porch.

The high hedge that protected her privacy had remained lush despite the heat, and she watched an assortment of insects flit about the foliage. Above her the sky was cloudless, the cerulean expanse close enough to touch. Another shade of blue came to mind and she smiled, mentally matching Reed’s moods to different shades of blue. The sky was curiosity.

Wonder what you’re up to today. It was an off day, cast and crew alike taking advantage of having a rare smog-less Sunday off. Reed was probably splitting her day between the script and her son. Which had to be a thousand times better than what she had planned.

Jae wandered back inside in search of some clean clothes that her mother would find appropriate for Sunday dinner. In the hall a long mirror reflected her current state of undress back at her, and for a brief second she was tempted to go as she was. “But Mother, all the natives in Samoa dress like this.”

Her mother would look back, lip curled in ethnocentric disgust and admonish her. “If all your friends jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, would you jump too? Honestly, Jacqueline.” Jae mimicked her mother in the mirror, then laughed and made for the stairs and her closet.

Twenty minutes later she was on the freeway, bound for Isla Vista. A crisp, clean white shirt was tucked into her Gap khakis, black leather

belt colour co-ordinated with the crop top and nine-hole docs. The wind billowed the unbuttoned shirt, letting air circulate up her back.

Jae engaged the clutch and dropped into fourth. The powerful engine responded to the increased throttle. Her mother would pitch a fit when she saw the bike, but Jae figured it would balance out the lecture she was going to get. "Well, that and the roast beef." The air ate her words as she smoothly switched lanes, the loaded semi not having enough power to travel at the speed limit up through the pass. On the way by, she repeated a childhood pastime and pumped her arm in the air twice. The trucker obliged and sounded his horn, smiling down from the cab of the huge truck.

"Cool." She waved back and then left him behind. The Dunlop tires ate up the miles, and soon she entered the small gated community in which her parents lived. The security guard recognized her and waved, the resident's sticker on her cycle a further guarantee of her right to enter the streets of her childhood.

Children played on neatly kept front lawns and a couple of teens jumped on and off the curbs, their skateboard wheels spinning and flashing in the sun. She turned into the driveway and pulled up next to her father's Pathfinder. Her sister Danielle had already arrived, her car tucked next to the garage. No sooner had Jae turned off the ignition, than two tow-headed children attacked her.

"Auntie Jae, Auntie Jae."

"Whoa. Hold on a second, you two." She laid her driving gloves over the seat and ruffled her nephew's hair before repeating the gesture with his sister.

"Jacqueline Anna Elizabeth ... what is that?"

"Hello, Mother." Jae tugged the strap free from the D-ring and pulled her helmet off. "Honda Hawk." She closed the visor and hung it over one handlebar of the silver and red bike. She pulled the brown leather jacket out from under the bungy cord netting on the passenger seat and tossed it over one shoulder.

"Don't be smart with me, young lady." Elizabeth Cavanaugh spun on her heel, imperiously mounting the front stairs and re-entering the house.

"Grandma's mad at you," Alex pronounced solemnly.

"I know, kiddo. But look on the bright side. It means she's not mad at you two." Jae ran a hand through her hair, raking it back to its natural disarray. "C'mon you guys."

It was after seven and thus far Jae had managed to stay one step ahead of her mother. They were her family and she loved them, but now she remembered why it had been a year since the last time she had agreed to Sunday dinner. The porch swing on her parents' deck still creaked. No matter how often it had been oiled, disassembled or otherwise tinkered with, the rhythmic noise remained, as familiar to her as her own heartbeat. One leg was curled under her body; the other propelled the swing back and forth.

Lulled by the motion that she had pretended was a ship when she was younger, Jae indulged herself in a moment of idle fantasy:

The swells were getting higher, the waves threatening to swamp the small boat. They had already dropped the spinnaker and were running under only the Genoa, the main sail having shredded beneath the gale force winds. Dumping her cargo was not an option, so Dr. Jae "Nevada" Cavanaugh fought her way to the bow.

She had already sent the men to relative safety below decks. There was nothing they could do up here; getting them through this was her job. The thick rope that held the wheel steady also provided her an anchor against the lashing tongues of icy water and wind-driven sleet.

"What were you thinking, traveling on that ... that thing?"

"Hmm?" The reverie of the childhood pastime was broken, and Jae looked up at her mother.

"You know I don't like motorcycles. Honestly, Jacqueline."

With a wicked gleam Jae let twenty years of childhood roll back, ignoring her mother. *They had survived the storm only to be picked up by a German U-boat crossing the same Atlantic route that would have taken her to New York and on to fame as the archaeologist who had brought the Lion of Corinth out of Macedonia.*

Instead she was being interrogated. The leather of her jacket had hardened slightly after its bath in the ocean and the collar scratched at her chin. But she held to her resolve to say nothing.

"You can't keep this up."

"Ah, but I don't have to. Soon my partner will be here to help liberate the crew and the treasure."

The errant thought accomplished what her mother's lecture couldn't and brought Jae fully out of the refuge of childhood. *Partner?*

"Are you listening to me, Jacqueline?"

Confused by the sudden shift in the normal flow of her daydream and by a conversation she hadn't been paying attention to Jae gave a stock reply. "Yes, Mother. I was just thinking."

Her mother sat next to her, face softening slightly. "It probably still hurts right now."

"What does?" Jae was even more confused.

"The way things ended with your friend Rebecca."

"A little." Except it didn't. Now that she thought about, Jae realized that she had resumed life as if Becky had never been part of it.

"Did you love her a lot?"

"I thought I did. She didn't think so."

"Some people aren't meant to get married or fall in love. You have a career that you married instead. Be proud of that. Love isn't for you, never has been."

For some reason that was the most depressing thing Jae had ever heard. But her mother was right. Love just wasn't something she did well. "I know." The swing continued to creak, filling the awkward silence.

* * *

Reed shut down the computer and pulled the phone cord out of the modem. She didn't bother to get up and put it back into the wall jack. Anyone worth talking to would call on the cell.

Talking and playing with Rio hadn't helped. Things she had forgotten and buried were now impossible to hide from. Things like Roan.

Even in death, she wasn't completely free of him.

"Cut." Roan stalked across the sound stage, and she struggled to focus. "Deliver the line, then pick up the gun. It's not that difficult. Even you should be able to do it, stoned or not."

The director looked vaguely unfamiliar and she stared at him in confusion, wondering why he was yelling at her. Another wave of pain swept through her guts, and it was all she could do to remain on her feet.

"You're coming down, aren't you?" His hand grabbed her chin, and wrenched her jaw until he was staring at her pupils. "Stupid cunt. You're in withdrawal." His thumb traced along her lips and she repressed the shudder.

"Too little, too late."

Dizzy, she jerked her head out of his grip. "For you."

He leaned forward, hot breath raking her ear. "Still mine, Reed, don't forget it."

It was now or never and she knew it. He thought he still owned her, and if she didn't get out, he would. He'd own both of them. Roan moved back to the chair behind the main camera, and the cast moved back into place, the crew likewise.

The faux tableau resumed its simulated action, and Reed pushed the pain back down, delivering her line. "You're wrong. There's one difference between you and me." She picked up the prop gun. "You're dead." The actress pulled the trigger.

"Cut," Roan yelled. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Line, gun, trigger."

Another sharp pain tore at her and Reed swallowed the involuntary gasp. "There was nothing wrong with that take. If the gun comes after both lines, then Cleary has warning."

"I don't pay you to think, just act. And you can't even do that." His pupils were dilated and glassy. He was coming down from his own high, unpredictable temperament made more so by the uncertain combination of chemicals in his bloodstream. "Take thirty," he called over his shoulder, dismissing the cast and crew. "And you. Here. Go get yourself together."

A bag was thrust at her and she took it, hand closing spasmodically on the plastic as another wave of spasms brought fresh pain. She nodded and struggled to remain on her feet. Finally he shook his head and moved away.

"You can't win, Reed." Roan's departing footfalls echoed mockingly.

"I already have," she whispered, then collapsed. Reed closed her eyes, the hard floor her last anchor to consciousness. It would have been so easy to let him win, to let the drugs swallow her. But she had already kicked them—she was clean. And the reason she had kicked them prevented her from giving in and letting Roan win.

She dropped the baggie and heaved herself to her knees. Water was spreading under her, the material of her pants wet. Oh God. It was too soon. What had looked like withdrawal to Roan, and what she had assumed were Braxton-Hicks, was in fact labour.

The car keys. Where were the car keys? The trailer, they were in the trailer. Breathing heavily, she stood and began to make her way out of the studio. The heavy metal door swung shut behind her, closing on her dreams. Tears stung at her eyes and one hand rested on the slight curve of her abdomen. "Hang on, okay?"

That was the one thing in all this mess worth anything, and Reed was

determined to get to a hospital. The drive passed in a haze of pain and blur of cars. She ditched the car, walked around the corner and hailed a passing cab.

“Are you all right, lady?”

“Just drive.”

Two blocks from her destination, she told the driver to stop and paid the fare, walking the remaining distance on her own. Three hundred meters that seemed more like a marathon. The pain was unbelievable, and for a second she considered lying down and quitting. Beneath the pain that nearly crippled her, Reed felt the baby kick, its first movements all day. No. She would give this child chances she'd never had.

One foot in front of the other—one at a time. She repeated the mantra over and over. The wide white doors hissed open, and she passed out.

They'd made it. It had been touch and go for a while, but they'd made it. Both of them. And she had never gone back. Until necessity and desperation had forced her hand, a situation that had culminated in a vicious argument with the man Jae had asked her to defend. The room had grown darker as late afternoon had become evening. Shadows flickered about and Reed watched them play on the far wall, deep in thought.

How long do I have before they dig up the rumours? Before Jae starts to ask questions that I can't answer? The younger woman had accepted her refusal to toe the party line of the production company, exacting instead a promise of silence.

There had been a brief flash of anger in Jae's office, then nothing. Even now she couldn't touch the core of rage that she knew lay buried under the veneer of indifference, tucked safely away with the other hurts and betrayals.

The nightmares that had all but vanished during the trip to Florida were back with a vengeance. She was emotionally stretched to her limits. Too much had changed in too short a time. Years of isolating herself had left her unprepared for the return to public life.

The biggest change was Jae. Reed smiled, thinking of the blonde director. They had known each other barely three weeks, but to the actress it felt like a lot longer. Most likely it was a result of close proximity during filming in Florida. One thing was certain: she missed the younger woman. That had been a surprise. Their routines had meshed perfectly, and Reed hadn't felt her privacy encroached on.

In the growing twilight she headed to the kitchen. *Red or white?* Red,

she decided, and poured a glass of the full-bodied wine. Out on the deck she leaned against the rail and watched the lights twinkle as cars traversed the surface roads. It took her a minute to identify what was missing. Guitar music. Someone who lived below her played guitar, and the familiar sound had kept her company in the evening as she studied her lines and did her prep work. Tonight it was silent.

Brrreeep. The cell phone chirped and she wandered back inside, picking up the sleek black handset. "Lewis."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Am I disturbing you?"

"No."

"Cool."

The line went quiet. Reed tried to figure out what to say. "What's up?"

"Not much. Tough day. You know."

Reed returned to the balcony and settled into the lounge chair. "Band practice?"

That got a laugh, and she could imagine Jae shaking her head. "No. Sunday dinner with my folks."

"They live in LA?" She hadn't pegged Jae as being a native of Los Angeles.

"Just outside of Isla Vista. My mother objected to my mode of travel, and things went downhill from there."

"She objects to a Saturn?"

"650 Honda Hawk."

"Goes with the tattoo."

"A Harley would go with the tattoos, but they're too noisy."

"You have more than one?"

"More than one what?"

"You said tattoos, plural."

"Don't miss much, do you?"

"No. So give."

"Hmmm. Trade you. I'll tell you where the other tattoo is if—if you'll give me a personal detail."

"You already know more about me than anyone else except Heidi and Rio."

"Really?"

"Yep. But let's see, what do you want to know?" It was a dangerous offer.

“Where do you live?”

The production company paid the rent and Jae had been in the limo that had picked her up for the flight to Orlando, so Reed was sure that the director didn’t mean the house in the hills. “Eastport, Maine.”

“You don’t sound like you’re from Maine.”

“It’s ’cause I’m not.”

“Oh.”

“So when’s the shoot?” She moved the conversation back out of personal territory.

“Thursday. You still okay with it?”

“Yeah.” It was odd, but the whole thing bothered her less than it had before. A cool breeze had sprung up, and she grabbed the blanket that rested on the end of the chair. “Did you get the script approved?”

“Mostly.”

Reed laughed. “You didn’t really expect a male producer to film a movie about lesbians and not want the sex increased.”

“I thought it would freak you.”

Serious, she leaned forward in the chair. “Remember the first time we met?”

“Yes. You’re not the sort of person one forgets their first meeting with.”

“You told me you weren’t known for directing pornography. Has that changed?”

“No. No it hasn’t.”

“Then I’m behind you all the way.” She paused. “Though you might want to consider a body double. I don’t think stretch marks would be too erotic.”

“You don’t have stretch marks.”

“Now who doesn’t miss much?” Reed teased, to cover her surprise.

“It’s not my fault you seem to think clothing is optional.”

“Unhunh. Pot calling the kettle black, if you ask me.”

“No one’s asking you.”

“Me thinks the Lady doth protest too much.”

Jae was laughing so hard that Reed had to take the phone away from her ear. The director sounded in better spirits than when the phone first rang.

“I missed this,” Jae said.

“Me too.”

“I need to go. See you in the morning?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Night.”

“Night, Roo.” The line went dead, and Reed paused a moment before hitting end.

The strumming of a guitar drifted up from below, and unconsciously Reed sang the familiar words, mind on the woman she had just been speaking with. “I knew you, before the fall of Rome, and I knew you when the west was young, woohooohoo.”

Reed walked back inside, dropping the blanket back onto the chair as she passed by on her way to the bath. Twin silver faucets served the porcelain tub a generous helping of steaming hot water, and then she eased her body into the soft, clear pool. She closed her eyes and sank back into her role, escaping into Dar’s reality. It was easier and easier to put on the intense executive, to let her behaviour mirror that of her character.

* * *

Jae held the receiver of the cordless phone, staring at the now quiet bits of technology and plastic. That was not the conversation she’d expected to have, and certainly wasn’t the reaction she’d been expecting to upping the intensity of the love scenes, either.

The whole thing was ... weird. Not bad weird, just weird, weird. Her palms were sweaty, and she wiped them on the legs of her pants. “Bet my heart rate is up, too.”

But Reed seemed to have taken the whole conversation in stride, oblivious to the subtext. “I haven’t flirted that blatantly with women I’ve been sleeping with. And that comment about stretch marks.... I can’t believe she took that one in stride.” She grabbed a beer from the fridge. The twist cap came off easily in her hand and she moved out onto the back deck, shadows dancing where sunbeams had played earlier.

An enigma. That was Reed. Stuff wasn’t adding up; or did Reed just not see it? Jae stepped back inside and reached up for the pack of lantern matches she kept tucked in the side of the doorframe. Her guitar was still in the hall, right where she’d left it after returning from Florida. She carried it back outside and peeled the travel tape from the case before releasing the straps that kept the 12-string nestled in its protective shell. The catches snapped open and Jae lifted the lid.

A thin, dark, felt-wrapped package rested on the body of the Guild, tucked under the steel strings. It slid out easily, and Jae turned it over in her hands. There was no note or card visible, so she untied the string

that was holding the parcel together. The embroidered, slightly manic face of Tigger smiled up at her and she giggled. Unfolding the forest green and black material revealed the words, 'Tigger Wear' around the elastic top of what she realized were boxer shorts. A small slip of paper fluttered to the deck. Boxers still in one hand, Jae picked up the note, holding it so the lamplight made the bold printing visible. 'Forgot to give these to you in Orlando.' A wide grin spread across her face. She didn't need a signature to know who had left the gift. "Reed...."

Moments later she was comfortably ensconced on the top step, beer just out of reach of her elbows, a lantern flickering in its own unique tempo, and the guitar nestled on her lap.

"Hey, little girl, is your Daddy home, did he go and leave you all alone? Unhunh. I got a bad desire, oh ho, ho I'm on fire. Hey, little girl, is he good to you? Can he do things for you that I do? Oh ho, ho I'm on fire." She continued to finger pick the notes of the chorus, mind drifting with the music.

Jae hummed lightly with the notes she drew from the strings under her fingers. Then she laughed as she recognized the tune. Her hands flew over the fret board as she threw herself into the demanding riffs and hypnotic words, voice ringing out in the cooling desert night. "... come lay your body beside me, to dream, to sleep with the lamb. To the question your eyes seem to send. Am I your passion, your promise, your end? I say I am, yes, I am. Yes, I am. I am your passion, your promise, your end. Yes, I am. Barring divine intervention there is nothing between you and I, and if I carelessly forgot to mention, your body, your power can sanctify...."

The cicadas chirped in counterpoint, and the moon illuminated the grass. "Yes, I am.... I say, I am...."

NINETEEN

"Ms. Lewis, what did you and Roan Pirsig argue about?"

Flashbulbs were going off in her eyes, and she turned away from the reporters. A jumble of questions was being directed at her, and Reed did her best to tune them out.

A large burly photographer stepped in front of her. "Did you see any evidence of his drug use?"

"Get out of my way."

"Have the police contacted you?"

"You walked off a set of a movie directed by Pirsig, why did he hire you back?"

It was only four o'clock in the morning, but the vultures were out in full force. The post-mortem had confirmed the rumours of drug use. *Where was security?* Reed began to shoulder her way through the pack. "I said, get out of my way," she growled, the rumble coming from deep in her throat.

"Do you feel anything about his death?"

"Not a goddamned thing. Now get out of my way." She stared at the man obstructing her progress into the building and he moved out of the way, camera still clicking off photos.

"What a bitch."

"Bitches sell more papers." Laughter echoed after the words, then the hullabaloo was cut off as the door to the sound stage shut behind her.

The cavernous building was unoccupied, and Reed moved through the different sets until she came to the ones that made up Dar's condo. Movable walls were open; camera tracks and lighting mounts were visible along the floor. She blocked out the evidence of reality and imagined warm sun beating through large glass windows, concentrating on letting go of the incident outside until she felt at home amid the props.

Black leather gleamed in the low light, and Reed settled onto the couch. In her head, scenes unfolded and she mentally manipulated the camera, getting a feel for what she wanted to do.

A hinge squeaked and she heard a door slam shut as footsteps echoed through the sound stage. *Jae*. Reed grabbed the tingle of pleasure the director's arrival sparked and filed it away to draw on later. Idly she wondered how much her interactions with Jae were tinted by her own portrayal of Dar. *Probably more than you realize*, she thought wryly. Or

less.

“Pick a hand.”

Reed leaned forward and put her fingers on her temples, pretending to use psychic powers to decide. “Right.”

“Bingo.” Jae passed over a tall cup, brown cardboard heat sleeve standing out against the white and green Starbucks logo. “How’d you guess?” The blonde sat down on the couch, feet tucked under her body, Indian style.

Shifting, Reed turned slightly, facing the director. “Well I had a 50-50 shot, but you’re left handed. I figured you’d have your own coffee in your dominant hand.” Their bodies were nearly touching, and Reed half expected Jae to curl up against her. *You have been watching too many movies.*

“Ah, logic.”

“I could make a Spock crack, but I can’t think of one.” The coffee tasted as good as it smelled. “Dammit, Jae, I’m an actress not a prognosticator.”

“That’s Bones, not Spock.” A low chuckle filled the stage, warming it.

“Your point?” she deadpanned.

Jae shook her head before leaning back against the leather. “Thanks.”

“For what? You bought the coffee. Thanks by the way.”

“You’re welcome. But I meant these.” The director snapped the elastic waistband of her boxers under her shirt. “It was a nice surprise.”

“Good.” For a second she’d thought Jae was going to actually show them to her. Reed looked at her watch. “I’ve got to get to wardrobe.”

“And Cait’s probably wondering where I got off to.”

People were beginning to file into the building and the place was coming to life. Food was being set up on the far side and they walked over to the heavily laden table. Reed grabbed a banana and peeled it.

“See ya, Tiger.” She winked and headed for wardrobe.

“Not if I see you first, Roo.”

The child-like banter followed Reed through the doors, and she resisted the impulse to turn around and stick her tongue out.

* * *

Jae trudged across the asphalt, headed for her office and the mound of work that still needed to be done before calling it a night. It had been a good day and they were right on schedule, though there was more water on the sound stage floor than in the hot tub.

Reed had filled the bottom of the tub with a dozen wind-up crabs, surreptitiously winding them up while her co-star was getting some last minutes cues. The young actress had come up out of the tub in record time, a tidal wave of water following her.

A wrestling match had ensued between the two leads. The resulting sense of camaraderie had lingered while the cameras rolled, and the afternoon's takes were perfect. *A very good day, indeed.* "Very good, indeed."

"What's that?" Caitlynn asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking aloud."

"You'd better sit down."

"Why?" She sat on the couch.

Her assistant opened the cabinet and turned on the TV, then hit rewind on the VCR. "See for yourself."

Jae watched the tape. She recognized the studio and then Reed's Range Rover coming to a stop. The narrator referred to candid reactions and made exaggerated claims of bad blood on the set. But the sinking feeling in her stomach told her that they might not be exaggerated after all. The film was undoubtedly cut and edited to make it look like an interview vs. a sneak attack, but it was unmistakably Reed's voice speaking in response to a reporter's question. "Not a goddamned thing. Now get out of my way."

Then there was stock footage of a much younger Reed and a captioned advert for tomorrow's show.

"I thought you gagged her."

"I did." Angry, she stood and grabbed her keys off the desk. *All you had to do was keep quiet. What were you thinking?* Well, she'd find out soon enough.

The silver Saturn prowled through the sloped streets of the Hollywood Hills. Spanish style architecture mixed effortlessly with post-modern bungalows and replicated Roman Villas. Jae turned right and pulled into the driveway of Reed's rental house.

She killed the engine and sat in the car for a few minutes. The house looked to be dark, and either the 4x4 was in the garage, or the actress wasn't home. Still angry, Jae got out of the car, slamming and locking the door behind her.

No answer. Frustrated, she pounded on the door one last time, then turned away. Halfway down the concrete stairs, she stopped and pulled out her cell phone. On the third ring the phone was picked up.

"Lewis."

“You home?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I’m at the door.” Jae remounted the last stairs and stood in front of the heavy wooden door. Curved terracotta tiles guarded the entrance and protected the house from the intense LA heat.

“Hold on.”

The line went dead. The scrape and clink of brass hardware filtered through as the door was unlocked, then swung open. Reed had one hand on the edge of the door, the other in a pocket of cotton shorts. A dishtowel was slung over her left shoulder, and the actress quirked her top lip in a small grin. She waved Jae in and the director stepped inside, shutting the door.

“Why, Reed?” Jae shot the words out before she could forget why she was there.

“Why what?”

“All you had to do was say nothing. Leave the party line to everyone else. But no, you had to comment.”

Reed felt the elation from seeing Jae standing on the front steps evaporate under the barrage of questions. The light flutter in her stomach had become lead. “All you had to do was have studio security keep—”

“Don’t lay this on me. You’re the one who commented. Have you seen the footage? You sounded like you’re glad he’s dead.”

“So?”

“So? A man is dead, Reed. Gone.” Jae’s hand movements reinforced the angry delivery.

What the hell is Jae so bent out of shape about? Reed moved into the living room, the small hallway too confining. Her own anger level had risen, and she needed to move. “We all go sooner or later.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

Jae looked stunned. “How can you be so cold about a man’s death? I would have thought that with Rio—”

“Don’t you dare mention my son’s name in the same breath as that monster,” Reed spat.

“He was a friend, my mentor.”

Reed stalked forward. “Don’t you fucking dare defend him to me!” The rage she had felt flare in Jae’s office flashed again, and this time she gave into it. Jae shrank back from her, and she followed the younger woman across the room. “He deserved what he got.”

"No one deserves to die, Reed."

"What the fuck do you know about death? What do you know about your ... friend?" She hurled the last word like an epithet.

"I know that he taught me about managing a set and to believe in my dreams. I know that he gave me the chance to direct a film." Jae's voice was raised as she hotly defended Pirsig.

"Are you sure, Jae? Or did he use you like he did everyone else?" Reed dropped her voice an octave, letting the words slide out slowly. "Did he see something in you that he didn't have? Did he find a way to have you direct his movie while he got the credit?"

"It wasn't like that."

"Or were you his whore? Those are the only two choices with Roan. Which was it, Jae? Your body or your talent?"

"Stop it, Reed!"

Tears had formed in the corners of the director's eyes, but Reed ignored the twinge of guilt, focusing instead on the anger. "Can't handle the truth? Your so-called friend took what he wanted from people."

"What did he take from you, Reed? Why do you hate him so much?"

The questions took her off guard. She hadn't expected Jae to turn the tables; the other woman should have walked out on her by now.

"Your body or talent. Wasn't that what you said? Which did he take from you?"

"Get out."

"No. You started this."

"I said ... get ... out." Salt was stinging at her eyes, and she fought to hold back tears.

"I'm not leaving, Reed." Jae sounded perfectly calm. The director had a maddening habit of doing that whenever someone got angry.

"Then I will." Reed moved through the living room and grabbed the door handle.

"You're good at that, aren't you?"

"Good at what?" she paused, the door open slightly.

"Running."

"Fuck you!" The door slammed behind her and she ran down the steps, oblivious to the fact that her shoes were still in the house. Jae's car was blocking the garage so she began to walk. The pavement felt cool against her bare skin.

Better now than later, because she'd have been out of there in a flash anyway, if you'd told her. That's how it worked. People didn't stick around. *"What did he take from you?"* She could hear Jae's voice as

clearly as if the woman were walking next to her.

"Everything," Reed whispered. "Everything."

* * *

The door slammed violently, the force of impact against the wooden frame shaking the panes of glass and rattling the walls.

Now what? Jae asked herself. *Do I go after her, or wait?* Reed's words echoed in her mind. *"Or were you his whore? Those are the only two choices with Roan. Which was it, Jae? Your body or your talent?"*

Roan had made a pass at her, which she'd neatly deflected by introducing him to her girlfriend, and the subject had never come up again. Disturbed by the actress' accusations, Jae looked around the room for something to take her mind off the implications.

It was sparsely furnished to begin with, but there also didn't seem to be many personal effects in the room. A couple of battered novels were on the coffee table and she looked at their spines: one was by Holly, the other by Eco. A small pile of videotapes rested neatly next to the VCR. Curious, Jae picked them up. *Desert Hearts, Peach, Go Fish, Fried Green Tomatoes*. Her eyes widened as she shuffled through the last two cassettes—*Bound* and *It's in the Water*.

On the desk next to the TV a stack of loose-leaf pages were held in place by a black roller pen, sheets covered in the same neat printing she remembered from the previous night. Jae resisted the impulse to flip through them, in case they were private letters and not research notes as she suspected.

The other corner held a blue wooden frame made of painted Popsicle sticks. Eyes the same shade as Reed's smiled up at her from the portrait, and she picked it up. He looked to be around six or seven, and his grin proudly displayed a missing tooth. Tucked in the lower left side, a smaller 3x5 portrait of Reed with the boy confirmed for her that this was Rio.

Reed and her son were perched on a large driftwood log, the ocean and the setting sun visible behind them. The actress' chin rested on Rio's head, and their fingers were intertwined. The angular planes of Reed's face contrasted with the softer, darker features of her son. For some inexplicable reason, Jae felt a lump grow in her throat, the poignant image telling her more than anything Reed had.

Jae put the picture back and headed for the door, deep in thought.

TWENTY

The reservoir gleamed darkly to the front, and Reed climbed through a split in the fence, then sat on the pale concrete wall. Somewhere during the cold walk her anger had lost its edge, confusion and fear taking its place. Joggers ran the waterside paths. Assorted shreds of conversations drifted out over the water and mingled with the chirping crickets.

Noise was good. It gave her something else to try and concentrate on, instead of what had just happened, and what tomorrow was going to bring. Not that it did any good. Reed sighed and wished she had a handful of stones to pitch in the cold, dark waters of Lake Hollywood. *Even the lakes in this town are fake. Is anything here real?* She drew a knee up and rested her chin on the bare skin.

"You're good at that aren't you—running?" Jae's parting shot echoed in her mind. *But it wasn't Jae's parting shot, was it? You left—not her.*

No. I left first.

You don't know that.

Sure I do.

How? Stumped, she thought about it.

She sided with him.

Did she? the mocking voice of her alter ego asked.

Whose fucking side are you on, anyway?

Yours.

Reed got off the cement wall and started to walk around the lake, silencing the internal voice. Wind whispered through the trees as she fell into an easy rhythm, not feeling the occasional stone underfoot, feet hardened by countless hours on the rocky beaches of Maine. *Going to walk around all night? And tomorrow? What then? Going to ignore her then, too? Face it—you fucked up. She had every right to be mad.*

"Stupid press." Reed spoke to no one in particular, her voice carrying across the still water. *Would Jae even still be there?*

You won't know if you don't go back, will you? What's the worst that can happen?

Deliberately, Reed turned and began the walk home.

* * *

Car or foot? Jae stood and considered her options. *How far could she have gone without shoes?* She exhaled heavily and gave the car a wry grin. *Knowing Reed, she could be sitting in Starbucks. A little thing like bare feet*

won't slow her down. Unlocking the Saturn, the blonde put the actress' shoes on the passenger seat and climbed into the car.

What am I going to say? This was beyond complicated. Either way Jae sliced it, she had to deal with this issue. The director couldn't let it slide, and the friend didn't want to. She had no out. Life was much easier when work stayed out of her personal life, or was that the other way around?

The key turned easily in the ignition and the engine roared to life. Jae turned left and headed for Lake Hollywood. The solitude of the park around the reservoir seemed the most logical place to look for the mercurial actress. The headlights swept the dark streets, melding with—and then leaping between—the puddles of light cast by the street lamps.

Jae squealed the tires, then leaped out of the car. Reed stood in the beam of the headlight, skin pale under the glare of the halogen bulbs. Inky locks blew about the actress' face, making it difficult to read her expression. Another car drove by and raked them with light.

“So.”

“So.”

The words came together and then silence fell between them again, the soft purr of the car's engine insulating them from other sounds. Reed moved to the passenger side of the car and waited. Jae shook her head, eyebrow raised, and got back in the car. The actress was holding her shoes, disbelief clear on the chiseled features. “Why?”

“Because.” That was the best Jae could come up with. She couldn't clarify for herself why she had come after the other woman, let alone to Reed. *You know why.* That picture had touched something, struck a chord, and she couldn't get the image out of her mind. It wasn't something she could explain rationally, though. The wheel turned easily in her hands and she executed a U-turn, heading back the way she had come.

It wasn't long before they were back at the rental house, and she turned the ignition off but made no move to get out of the car. Reed's jaw was still set, but Jae didn't think it was in anger. *More like she's trying to hold it all in.* The radio was playing in the background, keeping the oppressive silence at bay.

“Wake-up Maggie, I think I've got something to say to you....”

“Music is important to you, isn't it?”

Jae blinked, blushing as she realized she had been singing along. “Yes. I sucked at gymnastics, hated ballet—my mother didn't think soccer or karate were seemly sports for a girl. Then when I was 10, my father

came home with a chipped Ibanez electric guitar and a battered amp.” She smiled at the memory, the horrified look on her mother’s face and the mischievous twinkle in her father’s eyes. “I played it ’til my fingers bled. It gave me someplace to go, I still think better when I’m playing.”

“... steal my momma’s cue ... and make a living at playing pool....”

“My job’s important to me too, Reed. This is my shot. This is the one thing I’m good at. I can make this film, tell this story. But I don’t know what to do. Where do we go from here? I don’t know what happened between you and Roan, and I don’t need to know, but I do need to be able to trust you.”

Reed listened impassively, thumb running along the seam of one shoe. It was hard, but Jae kept from reaching over and touching the actress. She took the silence as tacit permission to continue, and struggled to marshal her thoughts.

“Nothing,” Reed whispered, eyes still locked on some invisible point outside.

“Reed?”

“You asked what he took. Nothing. Nothing I didn’t give him or let him take. But don’t ever defend him to me.”

“Ok, I won’t.” *But was that fair? No matter what he did to you, I owe him.* It hurt, the possibility that Roan had used her, that he had hurt and used Reed. Hot tears rolled down her cheek. “But how do we make this work? I don’t want you hurt, and I don’t want the film hurt.”

Reed swung her head around, meeting the director’s eyes for the first time since the younger woman had picked her up. Instead of reproach and manipulation, she saw only compassion and sincerity—and pain. “You keep surprising me.”

“I’m surprising myself.” Jae looked down. “But for some reason, Reed, I don’t want to go to war over this. As a director....” The words trailed off, and the actress watched Jae swallow convulsively before continuing. “Right now I just see a woman, a friend, who was hurt too much. I don’t know how or why, but I don’t want to add to that hurt.”

“Is there a store near here?”

“Yes.”

“Can we go?”

“Sure,” Jae agreed and restarted the car.

They didn’t speak, but the silence didn’t feel as heavy. She reached down and slid her shoes on. Jae finding her hadn’t been an accident. The brown Wolverines were proof that the director had come looking for her. They pulled into the store’s small, dirty parking lot. A group of

youths looked them over and Reed stood tall, hovering protectively over Jae as they entered the store.

Reed paid for her purchase then stepped back outside to wait. The crinkly cellophane came off easily in her hand and she flipped the top back on the burgundy and gold packet, the protective foil discarded. Blue-gray smoke curled around her fingers and she took a deep drag, the nicotine doing its job instantly. She stopped and looked at the ember-tipped cigarette. *Different day, different drug.*

Through the window she could see that Jae had an assortment of packets and a Coke in her arms. *Chips. Was that a Twinkie?* Stubbing out the cigarette, she went back inside. "That's not dinner, is it?"

A guilty grin flashed over the director's face. "Probably breakfast, too."

"C'mon." She walked back down one of the grimy isles and grabbed a package of rice. From the small produce section she chose an avocado, a cucumber and finally, a can of crab.

"What's that for?"

"Dinner."

"I was sort of going for something I didn't have to cook," Jae said. The cash register sounded and change was handed back to the blonde.

"Least I could do for being such an asshole."

"I have a better idea."

Reed feigned hurt. "What? I may be mad at you but I'm not going to poison you."

"You're mad at me?" Teasing disbelief was layered over the rejoinder. Jae spoke some words into her cell phone, none of which Reed understood. "Coming?"

Reed got back in the car.

"You're not an a ... you know."

Reed grinned. "Not a what?"

"Anterior opening on posterior anatomy."

"Asshole."

"Yeah, that. You're not one." Jae paused. "A pain in it, sometimes, but not one."

"Ouch."

"You're kidding me right?"

"All right, so I'm a pain in the ass sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Don't push it," she growled, then looked out the window, curious about where Jae was taking them. *So if I'm such a pain in the ass, why in*

the hell are you still here? She studied the blonde's reflection in the passenger window.

"Be right back." The car door shut behind the director, and she disappeared into a small doorway in the alley where they had parked. A few minutes later she emerged carrying two large brown paper bags and a large bottle.

"Jesus, Jae, that looks like enough to feed a small army."

"A little of this, a little of that." She handed the bags to Reed, and the actress cradled them on her lap. They smelled wonderful, and she realized that she was probably as hungry as Jae.

The car hugged the curved roads, and she watched the younger woman skillfully guide the coupe through the increasingly deserted streets. *This was it*, she knew as they pulled in to the driveway. If she let Jae in, then she was also agreeing to resolve, at least in part, what had happened earlier.

Without speaking, Reed got out of the car and walked up the steps, still carrying the food. She left the door open behind her and set the bags on the low coffee table, before heading to the kitchen to grab some plates.

Kung Po chicken and curried shrimp piled next to a heap of deep fried wontons guarded an open carton of rice. Jae was busily setting out various dishes, stealing the occasional tidbit with the chopsticks she held casually in one hand.

Reed plopped down and leaned over the table. A sweet and sour chicken ball fell prey to the fork, and she munched it contentedly.

"Umm. You gotta try this." Jae held up an aluminum foil container.

"I'll try anything once."

"Anything?" Jae drew the word out like the devil in the Cadbury's commercials.

Dropping the ginger pork into her mouth, she purred, "Anything." A faint flush crept up the director's neck, and Reed laughed.

"I surrender." Jae put her chopsticks down, finished, and leaned back against the couch, glass of beer in hand.

"Surrender? I think you decimated the evil forces of Foo Young and vanquished the last of the Kung Po. I bow before the victor." Reed had put her fork down three eggrolls and a helping of curry ago.

"Ha ha."

"Now there's a clever comeback." She stood and began to clear the debris from the table, as she stood, Reed caught sight of Rio's picture on the desk.

“Hey? You okay?”

Reed blinked, “Yeah.”

“He’s cute. He has your eyes.”

Reed couldn’t help it, hot tears trickled down her cheeks, the lump in her throat so large she thought it would choke her. Strong arms wrapped around her from behind, and Reed allowed Jae to hold her. She wiped a tear away with the back of her right hand. Jae moved around slightly, one hand rubbing slow circles on her back still.

“I’m here.”

She was being guided back to the couch and she sat down, continuing to stare at the picture on the desk. Jae was facing in her direction, hand over one of hers, but Reed couldn’t look at her.

“C’mere.” Jae tugged slightly, and Reed sank into the remembered safety, listening. “When I was nine, a friend of mine was in a horrible accident, and I remember my gran just coming in and holding me. She held me all night. She taught me that sometimes there was nothing you could say or do, that sometimes all you could do was hold someone and leave them to their pain, and just let them know you were there.”

Jae was telling her that she didn’t need to talk, that she had a choice. “Do you think all our important talks have to go like this?” She had slid down slightly, her head cradled in one of Jae’s arms, facing away, and once again marveled at the deceptive strength in the slight arms. It surprised her how much she wanted Jae to hold her, so she relaxed a little, still unable to turn and look at Jae.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I dunno, you’re scared and carrying a ton of baggage. It’s got to be hard doing that all alone.”

Tell her. Under her head, Reed could feel the steady movement of Jae’s chest. She moved again, taking the pressure off her shoulder, and rested on the director’s lap. She closed her eyes and basked in the unexpected intimacy. It was so easy to be around Jae, and she sensed that things were at a turning point. “Roan is ... was Rio’s father.”

Jae didn’t say anything, but reaching down, began to smooth the hair away from her temples. The gentle touch reassured her, and Reed raised one hand to the director’s knee, squeezing it in silent acknowledgement.

“It was pretty sordid on both sides. I thought I was a big star, and he fed the delusions with empty promises and unlimited drugs. I was stoned or ripped most of the time.” It had killed the memories and the pain, and she had gleefully embraced the new method of escape, adding

it to the haven she found in being someone else. “Roan took advantage of that....” She stopped. Jae had stiffened under her, and she hastened to continue. “It wasn’t love, but it wasn’t rape, either.”

The director relaxed, and Reed heard the soft exhalation of the breath Jae had been holding.

“When I found out I was pregnant, I kicked it. But it wasn’t soon enough.” She ran out of words and closed her eyes against the images and memories that came with the words.

“How are you feeling?” a nurse in a crisp, clean, starched pinafore asked—kind gray eyes watching her intently and a small cup with an elbow straw offered.

She took a small sip, running some of the cold water around her mouth before dragging her tongue over parched lips. “The baby?” A gentle hand had reached for her head, but she jerked back. “Where’s my baby?” There had been excruciating pain, a flash of a pale pink body and silence in the delivery room. She didn’t remember hearing a cry, and the last conscious thought she had had before the drugs had kicked in, was that it was too quiet in the operating theatre.

The mental film continued to run, the pictures surreal in the duality of watching and reliving the moment.

“The doctor will be in to talk to you shortly. Now I need to ask you a few questions.” A clipboard was removed from the hook on the end of the bed.

She threw back the blankets and got up, her legs holding despite the sudden wave of dizziness. “I want to see my baby.” The nurse was easily six inches shorter, and Reed poured every ounce of energy she had left into pushing past the woman. “Get out of my way.”

The nurse moved, one hand pushing on a small orange call button, sounding the alarm.

The long corridors stretched in three directions, and she concentrated on the white words painted on blue signs until she found one marked nursery. Two white-clad orderlies were headed for the room she had just left, and she slowly made her way down the antiseptic corridor. Up ahead several men and a couple of older ladies stood facing one wall. They moved to let her in, and her eyes anxiously scanned the tiny plexi-glass bassinets.

She counted the infants in her mental image as she had counted them that day. Six babies, four in blue, two in pink. None were hers. Real

tears mixed with the ghost ones as the despair of then ripped over her again, the passage of time not dulling the memory.

She fought to keep from falling right there in the hallway. It hadn't been enough. It had been too soon. Oh Jesus, I'm so sorry. The stab of guilt hurt as much now as it had then.

"Miss? Are you okay?"

"Someone get a doctor, she's bleeding." Words echoed in her mind.

She could hear the panicked voices in the corridor, but none of it touched her as she turned around and began the long walk up the endless, gray-walled corridor and out of the hospital. She ripped and tugged at the hospital bracelets, trying to destroy the tangible evidence of her guilt, but the metal catches held, the plastic only giving slightly, stretching but refusing to break.

Numbly, she stared at the rippled bands. Reading them now as she had then. Tiny blue letters resolved into legible words—"Baby Boy Doe," "Patient Jane Doe—#1367076-91." Reed read the second band again, the meaning of those three little words sinking in. One hand on the wall for support, she turned around and made her way back up the hall.

A young woman in a white lab coat, stethoscope and clipboard in hand, met her halfway.

"Where's my son?" she demanded for the countless time.

"Paediatric ICU." An orderly pushed over a wheelchair to them. "You aren't doing yourself or your son any good right now. We need to ask you a few questions and get that bleeding stopped."

She resisted being shoved into a wheelchair, continuing to demand to see her son. The lens of time allowed her to hear the panic and desperation in her voice.

"Your son is holding his own; the faster we stop your bleeding, the faster we can go see him."

The relief nearly overwhelmed her and she nodded—not daring to speak, afraid that if she did, it would be a dream and her son wouldn't be alive—and allowed them to wheel her back into the room, where the doctor examined the torn stitches. The nurse took up her station on a chair by her head, clipboard at the ready. A suture tray was brought in, and the doctor carefully swabbed the swollen flesh.

"Let's start with your name, Ms?"

"Reid, Lilibeth Reid." Close enough that she could remember it and different enough that Roan wouldn't find her.

"Thank you, Ms. Reid. Now I have to ask you some personal questions. You're not in any trouble. I just need the information so I can give you and

your son the best care possible, okay?"

Reed nodded again.

"How long have you been clean?"

"Four months." She felt the need to explain. "I didn't know ... when I found out..."

"You quit."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Cold turkey?"

She nodded again in confirmation. It had been the worst week of her life. She'd locked herself in a hotel room just outside of town after telling everyone she had the flu. Roan had exploded in rage at first, the black eye that came with it a further guarantee that filming would be delayed yet again. "Is he okay?"

"He was premature. That I'm sure you know. His lungs are underdeveloped, and we're waiting for a paediatric cardiologist."

"Rio paid the price for my drug abuse. I should be there tomorrow in person, not out here."

"You will be there. You can't do any more in person than you can do from here."

"What if I'm gambling his last days away? What if this is all the time he has left? What if Dr. Zerafa declines him? He's been so sick, one thing after another."

Jae looked down at the woman curled in her lap, and didn't have a clue what to say, so she took her grandmother's advice and shifted her body until she was lying next to the actress, then wrapped her arms around the older woman. The wracking sobs that shook Reed went straight through her, and she felt her own tears spill over and run into the raven locks tucked under her chin.

What kind of strength had that taken? No wonder she hated Roan. She drew Reed closer, rubbing her back as she did. So much pain. She made her decision, surprised at how easy it was to put protecting Reed ahead of the film, ahead of protecting herself.

Somehow she'd find a way to handle the media.

Reed's breathing had evened out and Jae continued to stroke her back, willing a peaceful night's sleep on the actress. Her own mind far too active for immediate sleep, she turned the events of the evening over mentally, trying to put together all the disparate pieces and unlock the enigma she held in her arms.

It was, in a way, maddening. Reed was the only person she knew who

could tell a story and leave you with twice as many questions as you started with. She smiled to herself, remembering the drunken actress and another story. Soon her own eyes began to feel heavy, the day's demands catching up to her with a vengeance now that she had stopped. It wasn't until she teetered on the brink of the dreamscape that it occurred to her that she should have set the alarm.

TWENTY-ONE

The most delightful sensation tracked across her chest and Reed moaned softly, the sound of her own voice pulling her further out of the pleasant dream and back to reality. Gradually she became aware that the comfortable weight sprawled across her body wasn't her imagination. Sunlight filtered in through the side window, casting strange shadows over the room.

Jae had one hand tucked inside the actress' shirt, thumb hooked on the outside of the buttoned shirt, fingers resting on skin. The blonde's head was nestled on her shoulder, the director lying half on Reed, half on her side, one leg thrown over hers. Warm breath was trickling through the opening in her shirt provided by Jae's hand, and she realized idly that she was responding to the inadvertent stimulus.

That wasn't the weird part though. The weird part was the fact that she had managed to sleep with Jae literally on top of her. *No the weird part is—you don't want to move.*

Nope, not an inch.

Reed looked at the still slumbering director in wonder. *She stayed.* They hadn't actually sorted anything out, but somehow they had reached an understanding.

The brightening light in the room told her that they were going to have to move soon. She stretched her head slightly and strained to see the clock.

Across the room a phone chirped, and Reed knew their time was up. "Hey, Tigger, wake up." She shook Jae with the hand that had been resting lightly on the director's shoulder.

"Mmmm." Jae burrowed deeper.

"I really hate to have to do this." She found the sensitive skin just under the ribcage and dug her fingers in, the mischievous glint in her eyes belying the sentiment.

Jae squirmed then lifted her head, green eyes widening as she met Reed's amused gaze.

"Morning," she smiled up at the woman still sprawled over her.

"Morning." The blonde propped herself up, hand still on the actress' chest and gave her a sleepy smile in return. Jae pulled her hand out of its Napoleon-like niche and looked up apologetically. "Sorry. I ah ... umm."

"Don't worry about it. I sort of figured you for a cuddler anyway."

Jae got off the couch and picked up her now silent cell phone. "Actually, I'm not. Not usually," she amended.

Reed rolled her neck, surprised at the lack of kinks and by how rested she felt. "Me neither."

The phone chirped again, and the director's response was lost in the noise. She left Jae to the phone call and headed for the shower. The hot water ran over her body, cascading over her breasts and down her stomach. One hand moved in a lazy circle with the soap, while the other traced a matching pattern over still hardened peaks.

She turned a shoulder against the wall for support. Soap mingled with water and her hands moved easily over her skin, tendrils of fire following her fingertips. The shower curtain fluttered as her elbow nudged it, the unexpected draft of cooler air sending a ripple of pleasure over her body as the pores contracted involuntarily. Instinct took over and she closed her eyes. Under her eyelids the lingering image of sunlight mixed with sea-green pulsed as she neared release. Reed could feel the muscles contract around her fingers, and her hips jerked slightly in response to the rhythmic contractions.

Glad for the wall, she sagged against it and waited for the brief dizziness to pass and her breathing to return to normal. "Whoa." She couldn't remember the last time she had done that. Guiltily, she looked in the direction of the door and wondered if Jae had heard. Deciding that the shower had covered any noise she might have made, she reached for the shampoo and efficiently washed her hair and removed the last traces of her walk the night before.

Reed stepped out of the shower, the cold air once again tightening her skin. Toweling dry, she could hear the familiar sounds of Jae walking around in the living room as she gave instructions to whoever was on the other end of the phone conversation—probably that Waters woman. A cupboard door shut, the conversation muted as the director changed rooms, and Reed stuck her head out of the bathroom. "In the freezer."

"Thanks," Jae acknowledged. "No, not you ... now make sure MIS or IT gets in there this morning."

Reed finished with her hair and moved to the bedroom, the scent of fresh coffee perking her up.

* * *

"No, she's still tied up in a meeting." Cait listened impatiently to Chambers' rant about Jae's absence. "You know how the freeway, traffic

can be. Yes, sir, I'll let her know." She replaced the receiver in the cradle and leaned back in her chair.

It was the first time in four years that she had had to cover for Jae. The director was never late for work; the AD just wished her boss had picked a better day to be the first time. "Must have been some night." It couldn't hurt for the blonde to have someplace to blow off the pressure of filming. The Palm Pilot beeped a reminder and she got out of the chair, heading for wardrobe.

About to exit the bungalow, in which Pink Dishrack Productions was housed, she stopped. Jae's silver Saturn was just coming around the corner of the sloped road that led into the Universal backlot. But that wasn't what had given her pause. It was the car her boss was following closely behind that made her stop and watch. Reed Lewis got out of her rental and approached the director's car, thermos in one hand, laptop slung casually over the other shoulder. Jae got out and smiled up at the actress. Cait couldn't hear what was said, but Reed shook her head and twisted the top from the container and poured what she supposed was coffee into Jae's cup, before resealing it.

Another couple of remarks were exchanged, then Jae turned toward the office while Reed turned in the direction of her trailer. If the oversized shirt hanging off the blonde's slender frame hadn't confirmed Cait's suspicions about where Jae had spent the night, the affectionate squeeze she gave the actress' hand as they parted nailed it down.

"Oh, Jae. Remember rule number one, babe," she pleaded with her friend, though the other woman was beyond earshot. Cait waited until Jae was almost at the door before stepping outside. "Morning."

"Hey, Cait. MIS get here yet?"

"They finished about an hour ago." Keeping her tone as neutral as possible she asked, "Interesting night?"

"Nothing happened."

That was interesting. Jae didn't even bother to deny where she had been. What Cait couldn't figure out, though, was how they had gone from the pissed off ball of energy that stormed out of the office last night to the domestic scene she had just witnessed in the parking lot. "Right, and I'm the Queen of bloody England."

Jae bowed and swept one hand out, waving Caitlynn into the office ahead of her. "Your Majesty."

The phone was ringing, and Jae leaned over the desk to grab it. "Cavanaugh." The joking, relaxed posture evaporated and Cait could see the taut whiteness as the director clutched the phone.

“Absafrickinglutely unbelievable. Find it. I’m serious, Bill, you find that tape or look for a new job.”

Caitlynn looked over. For Jae to come that close to yelling at anyone it had to be serious. The words “find” and “film” in the same sentence were not good omens either. Jae slammed the phone down and went to the corner where she began throwing jabs at the light bag. As usual, it didn’t take long for the director to calm down.

“Call Holly, and set up a meeting for this—no wait, for tomorrow morning. If we have to re-shoot Crandon, then let’s fix the lead-in to the first time scene at the same time.”

“No problem.” She made a note of it and watched Jae prowl around the office. “I hate to do this, but Chambers is looking for you.”

“You know, Cait, some days it just doesn’t pay to get out of bed.”

Cait smirked to herself as Jae left the room. “I bet.”

* * *

For a day that had had such a promising start, it was shaping up to be a killer. Jae held the last traces of the warmth from this morning tightly, determined not to let Chambers or lost film ruin the memory of waking up cradled against Reed. The executive producer, as expected, had not been happy with the sudden flurry of negative attention the film was beginning to gather.

Absently she ran a hand through her hair and took a deep breath. *Time for a haircut, Jae m’grrl.* Bangs were beginning to hang into her eyes, and she made a mental note to pay a visit to the set hairdresser.

Blood pressure back to normal after her meeting with the production staff, Jae exited the bungalow and crossed the lot to sound stage 17. Inside, rehearsals were underway and she watched quietly, not wanting to reveal her presence just yet. The second unit director was supervising a run through of the hospital rescue scene, the extras and bit players responding well to his deft touch with the material. It was important that that scene played out believably—not like some evil nurse out of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

She swung her gaze over to a corner, where Reed and Gwen sat quietly. A small smile quirked her lips as she studied the two actresses. Jae could tell Reed was tense, the set of her shoulders and the tightness along her jaw clear indications of lingering reserve. Light blue eyes lifted and met her mist green ones. She allowed herself to bask in the warmth she found there and smiled back before she turned away,

headed for her office.

At that instant a mechanized dolly truck clipped the corner of one of Kerry's bedroom walls, and the set collapsed dramatically. Jae ran across the large building, but fortunately no one had been inside the mock-up when it went down.

She sighed. At this rate, it was going to be a long day, a very long day indeed.

* * *

Reed unlocked her trailer and moved into the dark interior. She had left the air conditioner running so it wasn't as hot as the sound stage had been. Once again she looked at the small table in disbelief. A gray docking station hugged her laptop and a seventeen-inch monitor rested on the Formica surface. It had been there when she'd gotten to work that morning, all set up and ready for her laptop. She'd discovered an ISDN line and various other peripheral goodies, including a proper video link.

Unfortunately they hadn't been able to get the link at the doctor's end to work; a conference call would have to do. A quick check of the time told her she still had a little time before the meeting, so she settled back against the cushions.

There had to be something she could do for Jae. It wouldn't do to fall too far into the younger woman's debt. An idea struck her suddenly. She smiled to herself and reached over to turn on the laptop.

Right. And besides, it would take her mind off of the upcoming meeting.

Reed fingered the casing of the laptop. The actress didn't know what to think. Things like this didn't come without price tags. *How far? How far can I trust her?*

Do you have a choice anymore? She smiled at the memory of Jae's body sprawled over hers. *No. None.* Part of it—she knew—was that, in playing Dar, her resistance to physical contact had been eroded. Long held barriers were being released the deeper she fell into the role. And part of it was something else. *Face it, you miss Rio. You miss the hugs.*

As if on cue, the phone rang. She swallowed convulsively and picked it up. "Lewis."

"Ms. Lewis, it's Doctor Zerafa." The cardiologist from Eastern Maine Medical Center introduced himself.

"Hello. Is Doctor Chappelle there?"

“Ayup, Reed. I’m here,” Heidi answered for herself.

“How is he?” Rio hated being poked and prodded, the endless rounds of tests and medicines a drain on his normally sunny disposition.

“He’s fine. Geoff’s with him. He’s still sleeping off the sedative.”

Silence hung in the air a moment, then the cardiologist cleared his throat. “As you already know, the tube that was inserted shortly after your son’s birth is no longer doing the job, and he can’t continue on the Alprostadil indefinitely.” It was an effective drug to help keep the arterial ductus open until a surgeon could create a connection, but it was a stop-gap measure at best.

She couldn’t speak, her grip on the phone cutting lines into her palm, as she waited to hear whether Rio would get his shot at a future. The door creaked open and a harried looking Jae stepped inside.

“Sorry I’m late,” the director whispered, then slid in behind the actress.

Reed hesitated, then leaned back into the cushioning, accepting the support.

“Our best option at this point is to reconstruct the pulmonary valve. He’s old enough now that growth won’t be a big factor.”

Tears ran down her face as the meaning of the doctor’s words sank in. She sagged, releasing the pent up tension, and Jae wrapped her in a hug. “When?” she managed to croak.

“We need to give him some more time to recover from the last bout of pneumonia, but we’re looking at roughly seven weeks.” He paused, and Reed held her breath. “The fact that he successfully underwent a similar procedure looks good, but I won’t lie to you, Ms. Lewis. The valve may fail before we can even operate. And, as with any invasive procedure, there are risks. Do you understand?”

“I understand that he may die before the surgery, he may die during it, and we know he will if he doesn’t have it. So yes, Dr. Zerafa, I understand, only too well.” Behind her Jae flinched, the director only able to hear one side of the conversation. “Heidi...?”

There was silence on the other end for a moment. “It’s his best option, Reed.” Her friend confirmed the cardiologist’s recommendation.

“Schedule it.” She was holding on to her emotions as tightly as she could.

“Okay. I’ll get the consent forms prepared. Is Dr. Chappelle still a legal guardian?”

“Yes. Heidi can sign the forms.”

“Good.” Dr. Zerafa moved the conversation along, not giving anyone

time to dwell on the possibility of failure. "Do you have the drawings I sent you?"

"Yes." Reed looked down at the coloured illustrations, while Jae looked over her shoulder. She adjusted her position slightly to allow the blonde a better view.

"We'll open the pulmonary valve and create a connection between the aorta and the pulmonary artery. That will allow the blood to flow through the valve and to the lungs to pick up oxygen. It's basically the same procedure he had at birth. The only difference is, instead of bypassing the natural valve altogether and using a balloon tipped valve in its place, we will rebuild the valve itself. It's a new procedure, but we've had good success with children his age, and indications are excellent that he will be able to function completely normally."

"He wants to play hockey." She didn't know what prompted her to blurt that out.

The doctor laughed. "It's a good dream, Reed, though I wouldn't be putting skates under the Christmas tree this year." His comment broke the tension.

"Thank you." Reed didn't hide her relief. She'd been scared that because Rio kept getting sick, Zerafa would turn him down as being too high a risk for the procedure to succeed.

"You're welcome. I'll be in touch."

The line went dead, and she sat staring at the phone for a minute before putting it aside.

"You okay?" Jae asked.

"Fine."

"My granddad loved hockey, used to drag me to the Great Western Forum all the time. It was a pretty cool place to be in the middle of a heat wave."

"We took the train up to New York one weekend." Reed smiled at the memory of the crowded rail car and Rio's shining eyes as he watched the countryside roll by. "Rio wanted to see Wayne Gretzky play. We had to go to New Jersey to see a game. Madison Square Garden is always sold out."

"New Jersey? Now that's mommy love."

"No, mummy love was standing in the food line, the merchandise line and the autograph line. I think I missed a whole period."

"He like hotdogs too?"

"Yeah, but he can't have them. I let him have one that day."

"Reed?" came the soft inquiry. "I haven't asked before, but what's

wrong with Rio exactly?"

"It's called pulmonary valve stenosis." *And it's all my fault.* The familiar guilt spoke, its voice never silent for long. Long years of exposure to the medical field allowed her to frame the explanation in tones much calmer than she actually felt. "It's a narrowing of the pulmonary valve—that's the valve that controls blood flow from the right ventricle to the lungs." As she spoke, she traced her finger along the illustration.

"They can fix it, can't they?"

Reed looked up in surprise. Jae sounded as though she were on the verge of tears. "Yes." She had to believe that, didn't want to think about the alternate outcomes. Couldn't afford the distraction.

Jae's cell phone chirped into the silence that had sprung up. "Hello? ... On my way." She squeezed Reed's shoulder. "Sorry I can't stay longer, but we have a problem in wardrobe. We'll talk later if you want, okay?"

Reed thought about the offer, a part of her still reluctant to trust Jae with too much. It was hard to talk honestly about it with Heidi. She and Geoff, unable to have children of their own, had made Rio a part of their family, and there were some things too painful for the three of them to talk about. Jae pretty much knew everything already. "Yeah," she said, "I'd like that." Their eyes met and Reed let herself enjoy the empathy and connection mirrored there, then broke away, afraid she'd stared too long.

Jae moved closer, hesitantly reached out and hugged her. She returned the hug gratefully, letting her body convey a message she didn't have words for. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. See you in a little while."

Reed leaned back on the settee, the trailer seeming empty now that the director had left. A favorite moment flitted through her thoughts and she closed her eyes. It had been a cold November morning and snow coated the fields and hills, the white blanket evening out the rough land.

"Mummy, mummy wake up, wake up! It snowed!" Awe and excitement were mixed in her son's clear falsetto.

She opened her eyes to find Rio staring out the window, a wistful expression on his face. "Hey, kiddo. Want to go sliding?"

Three feet of energetic joy launched itself into her arms. "Can we? Really?"

"Yes, but you have to co-operate, and that means putting on all your woollens."

“Aw, mum.” The characteristic protest came on cue and she tickled his tummy, careful not to leave him gasping for air.

A couple of hours and a stack of pancakes later, they had hooked the wooden toboggan to the back of the Arctic Cat and set out for the hill. The snowmobile left a wide track in the fresh powder, the noise of the engine breaking the morning silence.

The hill was pristine, the newly fallen snow untouched by even the smallest animal, and the toboggan had made a crunching whisper as it cut a swath down the hill. The tiny blue snowsuit-clad bundle laughed with joy, and she folded her arms around him, the wind blowing her hair behind her.

Laughter bubbled around them as they caught air, the wooden sled hanging above the snow for a long moment before touching down again.

“Again, Mum?” came the breathless request.

“Yeah, Rio, again.” And she’d grabbed the rope, pulling him and the sled back to the top for the first of many agains.

There was a knock at the trailer door, a production assistant summoning her from her memories and back to work. Reed took a last look at the diagrams on the table. “Again, Rio, I promise. Again.”

* * *

It wasn’t fair. Jae blew a deep breath out. It wasn’t fair. The cast was working together and the script was sorting itself out. And now she had gremlins in the soundstage. Missing film, collapsed sets and interchanged clothing sizes. What next? *Don’t go there, Jae m’grrl. Don’t go there*, her grandfather’s voice chimed in her mind, reminding her not to tempt fate.

Eleven o’clock. She still had half an hour before she was due to run through the blocking of the afternoon’s shooting, so she grabbed her wallet from her desk drawer and headed out the back way.

The baggy cargo shorts she could handle, preferring to have lots of pockets and room to move in, but Reed’s shirt was miles too large—the actress also preferred oversized shirts. Jae smiled as she caught sight of her reflection in a storefront window. What was simply loose fitting on Reed absolutely swallowed her. Though, she allowed, the scent of sandalwood that clung to the material was an interesting perk.

Fifteen minutes later, a brown safari shirt from the Jurassic Park ride had replaced the borrowed cotton one. The director headed back to the studio only to find that Gwen and Reed were squared off against the

second unit director, Michael Brust. Both women had their arms folded over their chests and nearly identical expressions on their faces.

Not again. She'd thought that the two actresses were over their initial reluctance to work in tandem. Jae looked a little closer, suddenly noticing how close together Reed and Gwen were standing. *Hmmm, whatever is going on, it appears they agree on it.* At that moment, two sets of blue eyes looked over at her imploringly so she went to see what the problem was.

All three of them started to speak at once, and she held up her hand. "Michael first."

"Gwen keeps changing the delivery order of her lines."

Jae looked at him, then looked at Reed curiously. "Your turn," she directed, looking at the brunette.

"It flows better," Gwen supplied instead.

Reed added, "She's right. The cadence is better."

"Show me." The two actresses moved over to the kitchen set, Reed hopping up on a counter top. Jae raised a brow. *That wasn't in the script either.*

"Jae," Michael protested.

"Hold on. Just watch." She leaned over and whispered to him, "They might be right. And in any case they are working together."

"What's that?" Reed, as Dar, started the scene.

"It's going to be Szechwan beef when I finish." Gwen pretended to add something.

"That sounds tasty," Reed leaned in over the pot, one shoulder nearly touching Gwen.

"You make it very hard to concentrate." Gwen paused and looked up into Reed's eyes, their faces only inches apart. "Has anyone ever told you you're a really distracting person?"

"Me?" Reed drawled in mock innocence. It was another subtle change to the scene, but it worked. "No. Actually, I've been called a lot of things—most of them nasty—but distracting has never been one of them."

Gwen blushed and laughed a little. "Well, you are."

As quickly as Dar and Kerry had appeared in front of her, Gwen and Reed replaced them, as the two actresses stopped the scene and looked over for the verdict. Some of the dialogue from the original first time scene had been moved into a catchall "build-up" scene.

They were right. It worked much better that way. Sexual tension as well as friendship came through in the delivery of the lines. As a bonus, their physical positioning would make it easier for them to keep out of

each other's key light. "Can you repeat it just like that for the cameras?"

"Yes," they both answered in tandem.

"Good." Jae turned to Michael and motioned for him to follow her out of earshot of the cast and crew. "Trust them with the material. It's their job to sell it."

"Jae, if you let the Ice Queen get away with changing one scene, she'll change them all. Give that coldhearted bitch an inch, and she'll take a mile."

Her eyes cold with fury, Jae looked straight at Michael, the memory of blue eyes filled with pain and fear fresh in her mind. "It's my inch to give her. Is that clear?" She paused and took a step closer. "And if you ever use that name around the set again, you are gone."

"How can you defend her? Did you hear her response to Roan's death?"

"Did you ever consider that maybe, just maybe, she has her reasons? She's entitled to her feelings."

Clearly he hadn't, and he shrugged apologetically. "Maybe," he allowed skeptically. "But Jae, she doesn't have that reputation for nothing. Remember that, hunh?" A crewmember called to him and he moved away, leaving her standing there alone.

Oh that was smooth. Reed can fight her own battles. She doesn't need you doing it for her. Still, it was her job to set the example and standard of conduct on the set.

Reed was leaning against the wall near wardrobe, and Jae watched as the actress took a long swig from a water bottle. *It was, she mused, like knowing two different people.* There was the vulnerable woman with the razor-sharp wit who had held her through the night, and there was the Amazon Ice Queen. Oddly, she liked both of them.

The caterers had brought lunch and were busily replacing breakfast items with fresh fruit and trays of sandwiches. A cooler of drinks was added to the table, and the blonde walked over and grabbed a bottle of cranberry juice. She wanted to go over to where the actress sat, script in hand, reading. Wanted, in the middle of what was turning into a very bad day, to feel the reassuring presence next to her. Instead, Jae made for the camera equipment and began to double-check angles and lighting.

* * *

Jae turned off the light and exited the editing bay. The rushes looked

good and, depending on what Holly came up with tomorrow to alter the script's first time scene, it looked like those scenes might work. Now all they needed was for the replacement wardrobe to arrive in time to shoot the scenes for real. It was that or a kamikaze trip through Macy's. *Yuck*. Platinum credit card or not, shopping was not high on her list of things to do. She laughed gleefully. She might not want to go, but Cait would. It wouldn't matter to her assistant who she was shopping for.

Lights were blazing from Little Europe, and the director made her way up to the scale replica town. She watched with interest as action unfolded on the set and a stuntman came tumbling from the roof of a tall building while an actress looked on in horror.

"Cut," was yelled across the set, and the crew began to set up for the next round of angles. Jae enjoyed watching other directors at work. It was funny how similar commercial shoots were to film ones. In fact, in a lot of ways, filming commercials was far tougher than doing feature films. You only had thirty seconds; every microsecond of tape counted.

The actress who had been in the last shot moved to the side, and Jae sucked in a breath as she recognized the woman. *Becky*. The statuesque blonde spotted her and before she could leave, Becky approached.

Becky came to a stop so close that Jae could see the tiny pulse at the junction of the actress' throat. "Hello."

"Hello."

"Working late?" Somehow when Becky said it, it wasn't a question, but rather an accusation.

Jae stepped back to regain her personal space and just nodded. It struck her that she had nothing to say to this woman. *How can that be?* Lamely she tried to make conversation. "Coffee or beer?"

Becky stepped forward again and purred seductively, "I remember when it was coffee, tea or me?"

Her mind may not have had anything to say to the actress, but her body remembered the throaty timbre. Jae felt her nipples harden involuntarily at the familiar morning joke. Right up to the end, the sex between them had always been good, and Jae had no doubt that if she wanted it, she could have it again. Becky's eyes said as much. "Times change." It took her a moment to realize that she had spoken. *Guess I don't want it.*

The blonde actress stepped back. "It's a beer commercial."

Before Jae had to respond, Becky was summoned back to the set. Her ex walked away, then stopped. "You need a haircut." Then she disappeared from view into a make-up trailer.

Jae laughed in perverse reaction to the understated poignancy of the sentiment behind the observation, tears forming in her eyes, and slowly wandered along the pathway that led to the fake lake used as part of the town set for Amity in *Jaws*. The night air was a pleasant balm to her jumbled thoughts.

She'd have taken me back. If nothing else I could have gotten laid, released some of this tension. The wind rippled the water and ruffled her hair, and she stared at her own reflection in the dark lake. *Yeah, but on her terms.* And that wasn't enough anymore. She'd tried that route. None of it compared to the quiet joy of waking up cradled against Reed. *Cradled against? You mean sleeping on, don't you?* She snorted wryly at the memory. *You're beginning to make a habit out of falling asleep on her, aren't you, m'grrl?*

Jae flushed, recognizing the truth, then stared pensively out over the water. Falling asleep next to someone else was one thing—that, she'd managed to be able to do with most of her bedmates. But the director couldn't remember ever falling asleep with someone touching her, never mind literally on top of them. That wasn't the truly weird part though. The strange part was that sex had had nothing to do with what she'd felt on waking and seeing those intense blue eyes watching her warmly. And she very much wanted to feel that again.

"Which means," she whispered to the dragonfly hovering above the water in front of her, "I need to come clean, and soon."

* * *

Reed locked the trailer door and hefted the laptop case over her shoulder. She'd left a key hanging around the neck of the stone gargoyle on Jae's desk, since it seemed only the space around the figurine was immune to the clutter that covered every other inch. She wondered what the director talked about to it—and if it ever answered. The thought made her smile. She could picture the compact blonde quizzically staring at the object, as Jae presented ideas or film situations.

She hit the remote alarm switch on her key fob and opened the car door. A man stepped out from behind the shadows and grabbed the door.

"Can I have a word with you, Ms. Lewis? I have an offer that I think you will be very interested in."

"Do you now?" she commented flatly.

"Indeed I do. My name is Richard Foreman, and I represent 'Up Close' magazine."

Reed ignored the proffered hand and stared at him intently. He flinched under her gaze, but didn't back away. Instead he handed her a clear acrylic business card, which she refused the same way she had the hand.

"We are willing to pay you two hundred thousand dollars for the inside story on Roan Pirsig and why you walked off his set—then and now."

"No." She turned away in dismissal, but he grabbed her arm. The only thing that kept her from knocking him into next week was the fact that Jae would not be happy if she hit a member of the media—however dubious that appellation was for this man's profession.

"I'm a reporter, Ms. Lewis, and I'm good at my job. I will find out the answers—one way or another." He moved closer to her and looked her in the eyes. "And wouldn't it be better if they came with compensation?" Foreman tucked the card into her shirt pocket and stepped back before she could remove his hand forcibly, leaving her alone in the small parking lot.

The engine started smoothly and Reed pulled out, driving on autopilot as Foreman's offer ran circles through her mind. *Two hundred thousand dollars—that's a third of your salary.*

Aren't you forgetting something?

No. I don't owe Pink Dishrack anything. Not a damned thing.

And Jae? What about her?

What about her? she mentally snarled back at the annoying voice in her head.

The traffic was light and it didn't take long before she reached the house in the hills, mind more on the reporter than on the road.

Roan's dead, so does keeping Rio's parentage a secret matter anymore? If the reporters dig deeply enough it will come out anyway—they just didn't have a good enough reason to dig before. Reed looked out over the valley of dreams, the lights of Hollywood Boulevard a beacon in the dark. *Foreman smells blood.*

Light reflected from the surface of the celluloid business card. Insurance, that's what his offer meant. Insurance that there would be enough money. *And vengeance? Does that play a part too? Maybe it did,* she allowed, *but does that make it wrong?*

What about Rio? Her face softened as she thought about her son, a smile flickering across her lips. *Can I, after all this time, do that to him?*

Media attention was something she preferred that neither Rio nor Heidi have to deal with too often. So far Rio had been shielded and Heidi's brief brushes with paparazzi had been confined to the odd incident here and there, nothing major.

Roaming through the dark house, Reed continued to mull things over. *It still leads back to one place though, doesn't it?*

Jae. The name echoed in her mind, her conscience not allowing her the luxury of self-deception. *Would she understand?*

Does it matter? But she knew it did. The young director had walked through personal barriers as though they hadn't existed, awakening her to things that she had long since shoved out of mind.

Like the need to be held. She'd spent so long holding Rio and being strong for him—and for herself—that she had forgotten what it had been like to be held. Had forgotten the peace and safety of having someone care for her.

It was, she realized picking up the phone, another tough choice in a life full of them. It was no choice at all.

TWENTY-TWO

It was still dark when she pulled the Range Rover to a stop in her allotted parking spot, and Reed locked the car, engaging the alarm. She loved this time of day—that almost non-existent time between night and day where everything seemed surreal, and the world verged on revealing hidden truths.

Slowly gray gave way to the first tendrils of morning light and by the time she arrived at the white trailer, dawn had replaced twilight. As soon as she unlocked the door, the actress knew that Jae was inside; she just wasn't sure how she knew. *Maybe it's because she expands to fill space*, she thought, wryly surveying the scattered paper and the shorts lying on the floor in a rumpled heap.

The door creaked and Reed looked up to find Jae regarding her sleepily, green eyes still hooded with sleep. The director was wearing the white cotton shirt she had borrowed the day before, open buttons revealing a pair of gray and burgundy boxers decorated with an embroidered cartoon heroine—which one, Reed wasn't sure.

"Morning," she drawled, then brushed a lock of blonde hair out of her friend's eyes. "You need a haircut."

Jae gave her a funny look, then shook her head. "Why is everyone so interested in my hair?" she chuckled. "I'm going to see the set hairdresser this morning. I meant to do it yesterday, but...." She spread her hands in a "you know" kind of gesture.

"Work got in the way," Reed finished for the other woman, a grin quirking her full lips. "Go take a shower and wash your hair," she instructed moving for the door.

"Why? Where are you going?" came a cautious inquiry. Jae was regarding her warily, both blonde brows furrowed.

"To get a pair of scissors," Reed paused for effect, "and some coffee. To steady my hands," she deadpanned, swallowing the smile that threatened to ruin the effect, as Jae's eyes widened in consternation. Reed didn't give the director time to reply and closed the trailer door firmly. Once outside, she chortled to herself, then made for the make-up rooms.

* * *

Jae stared stunned at the trailer door as it closed behind the actress. *She's going to cut my hair?* Then a mental image of Reed leaning in to

even out her bangs intruded on her fear, paradoxically adding to her reluctance. *Relax, m'grrl. Could it be any worse than what Danielle did to it in the third grade?* She laughed more at the memory of her mother's reaction than at the actual haircut—that had grown out speedily. But her mother's horrified expression lingered on in sibling lore. Another wry thought struck her. *I'm guessing that telling her you dig chicks while she's holding scissors is probably out.*

She moved into the small stall and started the water. Hot jets sprayed over her hand and into her face as she tested the temperature. Shucked, the borrowed shirt rested on the ground, and Jae hung a towel over the bar before stepping into the shower.

Water rushed against her face and she stood a moment letting it flow over her features, waking her up and making her skin tingle with its force. The only soap she could see was a clear squeeze bottle with amber-coloured body wash. She picked it up and inhaled the scent. *Reed. So that's why she always smells of sandalwood.* It foamed easily in her hands and Jae carefully lathered her body, washing away sleep and nervous tension.

Five minutes later, she had completed her assigned task and grabbed the thick towel, rubbing it vigorously over her body and hair. A sharp click sounded in the trailer as the door shut behind the actress' return. After wrapping the towel around her body, Jae went into the main room, where Reed stood, brow arched, regarding her with interest.

"Whaaat?" she asked, drawing the word out in imitation of the actress.

"Nothing."

"Roo." Jae advanced on the dark-haired actress, trying to project edgy menace, but succeeding only in getting a chuckle from her friend.

Before she could formulate another strategy, Reed quickly snaked out a hand. Unable to dodge in time, Jae felt the towel come away in the actress' hand.

"That was a nice towel you were almost wearing." Reed whirled the towel in one hand, nonchalantly transforming it into a time honoured weapon.

"Reed! Reed, you wouldn't? Reed!" Jae squealed as the towel snapped at her thigh, cracking in the air, just missing the sensitive skin. She yanked a cushion off the settee and used it as a shield, as she laughingly tried to elude the forays of the fluffy blue whip. *She's playing with me, actually playing with me.* It was a side of Reed that she had expected existed, but not one she'd gotten many clear glimpses of.

"Looks like I most certainly would, green-eyes." Blue eyes flashed with rare humour, and the full lips were cocked in a lopsided grin.

Caught in her friend's gaze momentarily, Jae nearly forgot to duck the next strike and only avoided it by throwing the pillow into its path. A maneuver, she realized too late, that left her defenseless. Breathless with laughter, she held up her hands. "I surrender. I surrender."

"Thought you said Amazon Ice Queen wasn't a rank."

Wow, *she's in a good mood this morning*. "That depends entirely on your point of view," she quipped, reversing the dialogue.

Reed laughed. "Oh I don't know. I'd say I'm the one with the point of view. I was wondering where the second tattoo was."

Jae couldn't help it, she blushed, realizing that she had been dashing about sans clothing. Even worse, it appeared that her body was betraying her, now that the situation and its implications had been pointed out. But before she could self-consciously cover her chest and the tell-tale evidence of Reed's effect on her, the actress expertly draped the towel over her shoulders, then guided her towards a chair.

"C'mon. Sit down."

She sat, but looked up, unsure. "I dunno about this." It just seemed so ... what? *Intimate? Well at least I'm not totally naked. Right, and like the towel covers much. You and your cavalier attitude about clothing, I swear, Reed.*

"Relax. I haven't snipped Rio's ear off, and hard as it is to believe, he's even wigglier than you."

Long, tapered fingers ruffled her hair gauging, Jae guessed, the current length against its normal one. "Just a little off the top then, if you please," she joked, surrendering to the actress.

"Righto, Guv."

Jae could hear the metallic snick of the scissor blades as they moved past each other, taking bits of blonde hair with them. Warm breath tickled her ear, and the intoxicating scent of Reed and her perfume filled her nostrils. The actress worked quickly and quietly, her touch gentle and sure. For an instant Jae wondered what it would be like to have Reed touch her in passion, then cleared the image from her mind, choosing to concentrate instead on the easy camaraderie that flowed between them.

Reed, in the process of cutting her bangs, leaned in close, aqua irises scant inches from her own eyes. They were so close together that they could have been breathing the same air, and Jae fought being swallowed by the sudden emotion that rose up as she looked into the unguarded

eyes of her friend. It seemed that Reed paused for a brief moment as she returned the gaze, before she cut away the last of the out of place wisps of hair.

“There.” Reed held out a mirror and Jae blinked.

The style had been altered subtly, but it looked good and she smiled up at Reed. “Cool, thanks. I like it.” It was a little softer than what she habitually wore, but at the same time looked more business-like than the blonde shag had.

“G’wan, get dressed.” The actress ruffled her hair and began to sweep the small pile of blonde locks into a dustpan.

Jae snagged a coffee cup along with her pack before ducking into the sleep area to change. Moments later she emerged to find Reed pensively staring into space, hands behind her on the countertop she was leaning against. “Penny for your thoughts.”

An inscrutable look flashed her way, two dark brows knit in intense concentration. Quiet held for a long instant, then Reed reached into her pocket and handed over a clear plastic card. “Actually, it seems they’re worth considerably more than that.”

A leaden lump formed in the pit of her stomach, but Jae tried to sound casual. “How much more?” Money was, she had come to learn, an important motivating force behind Reed’s even being in Hollywood—behind her even making this picture.

“Two hundred thousand dollars more,” came the quiet answer.

“Two hundred thousand dollars?”

Reed regarded her solemnly then took a depth breath. “They want the inside story about Roan.” The words were flat, delivered in a detached tone that Jae had come to recognize meant that the actress wasn’t detached at all—no matter what she wanted other people to think.

“That’s a lot of money,” Jae said to buy time.

“Yes. It is.”

Blue eyes were studying her intently and Jae swallowed, caught between work and Reed. *She’s waiting for my reaction. How can I say no? How can I say yes?* Riordan changed everything. She knew it, knew that if Reed took the money and gave the interview, that she couldn’t fault the actress for it. They stood in silence, and then Jae realized that Reed was crying equally silent tears. Tiny tracks of water were running down the other woman’s face. Without thinking, Jae reached up with one thumb and wiped away a tear. “Hey, don’t cry.”

“I can’t win, Jae. It’s going to come out, with or without my help. And some things are better left alone.”

Reed was right. For that kind of money to be bandied around, the scandal sharks obviously smelled blood. Jae stepped back a little, one hand on the taller woman's waist and moved to look at Reed head-on. "Do you trust me?"

A shadow flickered across Reed's face, and Jae watched with a mixture of concern and fascination as pale irises darkened—guarded indigo replacing open blue. "Yes." The word was breathed so low that she almost missed hearing it.

Reed hadn't known she was going to say yes until the word had passed by her lips. And part of her was screaming to take it back. She didn't. "So. What do we do?"

Jae looked up, an impish grin on her face. "We give them an interview. Cait style."

"Cait style?"

"Cait style," Jae repeated enigmatically, then moved to the door. "When you've finished with wardrobe, meet me in my office."

"O-kay," she agreed. *What in the hell are you up to?* Looking deeper, Reed realized that part of her was looking forward to seeing what the blonde had up her sleeve. She'd called Heidi last night, waking her from a sound sleep, to discuss the implications of details becoming public. They weren't just her secrets to tell.

"Don't go all Eeyore on me, okay?"

Reed realized she'd been staring into nothingness again, and smiled wanly. "I'll try."

"Okay." Jae looked like she wanted to say more, but the blonde exited the trailer, shutting the door firmly.

She had, it seemed, made the right decision. And Jae had, it seemed, meant what she had said the other night. *So what's going on here, Reed? Why her?*

On the face of it, they had absolutely nothing in common. *Well, that isn't quite true*, she mused. *Coffee, that's one thing we've got*. Reed chuckled quietly to herself and headed out the door, putting the question aside for later, when she had more time to consider what was happening.

And something was happening. That she knew.

* * *

"Nice," Caitlynn teased, ruffling her boss' hair.

"Thanks."

“You go to Dana?”

“No.”

“Raoul?”

“No.”

“Oh my God, Jae. You didn’t let the studio stylist do it, did you?”

“No. Reed cut it.”

Cait thought about it for a second. Did she really want or have the right to intrude here? Yes on two fronts—as a friend and as AD. “Then clue me in, ’cause all I see is you headed for disaster if you keep on this road.”

“What road?”

“This—thing—you have with her. Remember The Rule, Jae.” It was the rule that had kept them from becoming lovers. Both of them had agreed it would have been a lot of fun, but that it had no place in a working relationship that was also a friendship. That had been almost five years ago, and Cait had watched as Jae went through relationship after relationship. Jae was an excellent friend and boss, Cait had discovered, but made a lousy girlfriend.

“The Rule doesn’t apply here. We’re just friends.”

They had entered the shared office, and Cait shut the door to ensure they had some privacy. “Are you?” She held up a hand to forestall Jae’s reply. “Just listen for a minute, okay?” Her boss nodded and sat on the couch, so Cait took a seat opposite her and resumed the conversation. “Jae,” she said gently, “be honest with yourself, okay? If I can see it, how long before everyone else sees it too? Sniping has already started.”

“Sniping?”

“A few charges of favoritism, stuff like that.”

“Favoritism?” Jae sounded confused.

“You let her get away with things like changing dialogue, you dropped an ISDN line into her trailer; it doesn’t take long for stuff like that to get around.” Cait took a deep breath. “Michael thinks you’re being played.”

“And you? What do you think?” Twin jade points of intensity were holding her own brown ones, and Jae had leaned forward.

Cait sensed she was treading the thin edge with her friend, but they had been through too much together for Cait to back away now. “I think that if you play with fire, you eventually get burned. I think you are going to get burned. Women like Reed Lewis use people like they breathe air.”

“You don’t know her.”

“Do you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how well anyone knows her,” Jae admitted quietly. “I know I like her.”

“Be careful, Jae. Don’t let her use you as some sort of acting experiment.”

“She’s not,” the blonde said with conviction.

“How do you know?”

“Because ‘she’ doesn’t.”

Cait stared back at her boss. The director was looking down at her feet, one hand raking through her newly trimmed hair. *Doesn’t know what?* Then her eyes widened as she realized what Jae was telling her. Reed didn’t know Jae was gay. “Then I apologize.”

Jae looked confused. “For what?” Her blonde brows were knit together.

“For presuming that Lewis was using you.” She emphasized the last word. “I think I had it backwards.”

Jae leaped to her feet and whirled around. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean. Can’t get much safer, can you?”

“Subject change.”

Cait decided to take a slightly different tack. Jae obviously wasn’t ready to discuss the issue. *Like it’s a new issue, not.* Jae’s issues with intimacy were a long-standing battleground between the two of them. Mostly because she was the one who had to hold Jae through the night and dry the tears as the blonde dealt with one failed romance after another. “I don’t know quite how to tell you this, but you’re not the first director she’s been....”

“Involved with. I know.”

“Oh. There’s more. Thom had some other interesting tidbits thrown across his desk yesterday. ‘Up Close’ magazine....”

“Offered her two hundred thousand dollars for a tell-all interview.” Jae passed over the celluloid business card.

Cait studied the small, transparent card. *Did it work both ways? Had Jae somehow made an honest connection with Lewis?* One thing was certain—she was going to have to revise her opinion of the actress. The last thing she had expected to hear was that Reed Lewis had already informed Jae about the interview. Especially not in light of the previous incident with the press.

Lewis would bear watching. “Is there much to tell?”

“Yes.” Jae’s voice was subdued, her eyes clouded. “There is. And we

have to find the best way to tell it.”

A knock sounded softly at the door, and Cait watched with interest the expression on Jae’s face change as her boss let the actress in. Even more interesting was the brief flash of warmth in Lewis’ eyes before the performer turned icy eyes in her direction.

“Reed, I need for you to tell Caitlynn about Roan.”

The actress clearly looked startled. “You didn’t?”

“It’s not my place. You have to decide how much to tell. But the more you tell Cait, the better she will be able to help.”

Cait listened quietly and let Jae handle the actress. They did have rapport; she could clearly see that. Had seen it during other interactions too, but had chalked it up to the intensity of filming and the time they had spent together—and, well, to Jae’s being physically attracted to the actress. *I might need to buy you that toaster oven after all.*

Jae and Reed had taken seats on the low sofa, and the AD pulled one of the armchairs closer, then waited for the actress to begin. Just when Cait thought that the woman was going to remain silent indefinitely, Reed began to talk in low measured tones, her expression unchanging.

At the mention of hard drugs, late night parties and chemical-based coercion, Cait looked up at Jae, who had sucked in a deep breath, worried about how her friend was taking the information about her mentor. Conflict was written there, but so was compassion, the latter obviously directed at the dark-haired woman seated so close to Jae that Cait wasn’t positive they weren’t touching in places.

Cait continued to listen, but something was missing. *Why did you walk away from the filming of Torque?* Cait mentally asked, then decided to voice the question. “I can work with that. We should be able to take the moral sting out of it, but I need to ask you a question.”

Reed stared at her, then looked back at Jae before returning eyes as cold as stone to meet her gaze. Cait tried to look as open and as non-judgmental as possible and just waited.

“Ask.”

“Why did you walk off the set of *Torque*? More importantly, why did he hire you for this picture?”

The actress exchanged a veiled look with Jae, and Cait watched the silent communication curiously.

“Lifestyle change. Drug-induced alcoholic hazes were no longer a way I was willing to live my life.”

“And the reason he hired you back?” Cait had the definite sense that Reed preferred direct questions to beating around the bush, though she

was equally sure that the actress hadn't told her everything.

Reed grinned wryly, a chill smile that was almost feral. "The ideal answer would be—my acting talents. The truth is a cross between blackmail and revenge."

"Can I get a shot of clarity here, please?"

"He found it amusing that he could force me to make a picture that would have me playing a character whose lifestyle I found personally abhorrent."

Oh boy, Jae wasn't kidding, this chick is seriously on the homophobe side. Which explains why Jae fell for her. "Still not getting it." Cait looked over at Jae to see if the director could shed some light on what the actress was talking about, but the blonde looked as confused as she was.

"He owned me." The words were flat and toneless, but the flash of anger in the blue eyes was unmistakable. "If I wanted to work in this town again, it had to be for him."

There was an answering flash of anger in Jae's eyes, and the director suddenly stood and stalked over to her desk. This time, Cait exchanged looks with Reed as they both watched the rapid, angry search of the box sitting next to the stone gargyle.

Jae was rifling pages on a thick contract. "Thunder turtles."

Cait was startled. As far as expletives went that one was pretty strong for Jae, even if it was odd. The tone of voice left no doubt at all that the director was cussing.

"Who's your agent?" Jae asked Reed.

"Liz Kuiper at Gryphon."

"Cait, deal with this, will you?" Her boss handed over two contracts, one of which had some notes scrawled along the margin of the first page.

"Aye, aye." She set them aside for the moment in order to return to the subject at hand. "Okay. I have a plan of sorts. But I need some help to pull this off. Can I assume that you want to collect the money from 'Up Close'?"

"Yes," Jae answered, cutting off whatever reply Reed was going to make.

"Okay." Cait turned to the actress. "Do you have any friends?" Jae cleared her throat and shot her a dirty look.

The actress just chuckled, a deep low sound that rumbled from her throat. "A snow gnome or two."

"I meant—friends other than Jae, not that you didn't have any at all."

"Cait," Jae interjected.

“What?”

“Hand over the shovel. You dig any further and New Zealand will have a new immigrant.”

Jae held out her hand and she surrendered the invisible implement. “Sorry.”

“Dr. Heidi Chappelle. She has a veterinary farm in Maine with her husband Geoff. Why?” Reed interjected.

“Because we are going to play both sides against the middle, so to speak.”

“Shot of clarity here, please.” The actress repeated her earlier words back.

Caitlynn acknowledged the jibe. “Touché. Simple. We’ll give ‘Up Close’ a suitably scandalous interview, then follow it up with one leaked to a more reputable source.”

“Oh Cait, that’s brilliant,” Jae laughed wickedly.

The actress looked slightly puzzled and a bit miffed that she didn’t get the joke, so Cait opened her mouth to explain, but before she could, Jae sat back down and grabbed Reed’s hand.

“You’ll give them their exclusive with enough truth that they can’t come back on you later—Cait will write the script for it. Then a day later, we have a friend of yours leak the rest of the details and put a different spin on them. You stay in the clear, and the last interview that people remember is ours.”

“What about...?”

Cait listened to the conversation under the words—there was indeed more going on than met the eye.

“Safe. But you have to do this our way. No losing your temper, no going off half-cocked. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I need to go meet with Holly. I’ll see you on the set later.” Jae squeezed the actress’ hand and motioned for Cait to follow her to the door.

“What’s up?” she asked her boss in a whisper.

“Don’t push her for more than she’ll give. And be nice.”

“I’m always nice.”

“Right. And I’m the Queen of Sheba.”

“Okay, so I’m busted. I won’t be telling her to bite me or anything. But I have to tell you, this is a lot of extra trouble to go through for a homophobic actress who hates her job.”

“Maybe. But it’s not too far to go for a friend.” Jae walked out of the

office and started down the corridor, then paused. “And Cait, she doesn’t hate her job.”

TWENTY-THREE

Jae stopped in front of the heavy wooden door then unlocked it, allowing it to swing open before she stepped inside. Out of a combination of respect and grief, she had left Roan's office untouched, his things still the way he had left them the last time he walked out of the room.

Methodically, she began to pack the contents of his desk into the empty cartons. Pens, paper, small doodads and assorted supplies went into the box. Nothing was held back. She wanted no part left behind of a man whom she was coming to despise. The center drawer was locked and she dug in the pencil holder for the spare key, then slid it out from its sheath.

A slim, rectangular gunmetal gray box rested on a small stack of manila envelopes. Gingerly, she lifted the box and popped the catch. Nestled inside were bundled packets. A name on one caught her eye and she put the others down. *Should I?* The flap opened easily and the contents slid onto the desk, seemingly of their own volition.

It was unmistakably Reed. But it wasn't the woman she knew in the photos. Jae fanned them out on the walnut desk. They were vaguely in chronological order, she realized, studying the progression of photographs. Here it was in black and white. Stark proof of words she hadn't wanted to believe, and of a truth burned into guarded blue eyes. Reflexively she gripped one picture. High cheekbones contrasted with glazed eyes and a look so haunting that Jae felt the first sting of hot tears well up, threatening to spill.

What were you looking for so desperately, Reed? Another picture found its way into her hands and Jae convulsively shredded the picture, sending disjointed bits of a scene no one should have been witness to to the floor. *You were wrong, Reed. It was a rape.*

In the drawer she found a lighter, and one by one she burned the photos, until only the first one remained. After a moment's hesitation, she slid it back into the manila envelope and set it aside to take with her when she finished.

Jae grabbed a garbage bag and, item by item, the tangible pieces of Roan's working life were consigned to its inky depths. *Cait can have his office.* Suddenly she realized that she had been throwing videotapes and ornaments at the bag, scattering debris over the room.

The blonde slumped to the ground, finally letting the tears flow freely

as she let go of the cherished image of her mentor. She didn't want to believe it. Her experience of him had been so different than Reed's, but the contracts had given undeniable credence to the actress' claims.

Not only did he own her, but the second contract—the one for this film—contained a clause that held back part of her salary as a performance guarantee, as well as clause after clause of petty demands and conditions.

She couldn't do a damn thing about the first contract—not until they found out who owned Roan's film company, at any rate. But she had made a note for Cait to renegotiate and vet the restrictive clauses, along with releasing the surety bond.

This is the last Hollywood picture I direct. Jae stood and opened the file cabinet and removed the files she thought they might need, including one labeled 'Reed Lewis.' Not opening it, she added the folder to the keeper pile. *I can't take any more right now.* The studio cleaners could clean out the rest of Roan's stuff, for all she cared.

But there was no way she could work in here. Not anymore.

Work.

"Oh, cripes." She ran out the door and headed for the soundstage.

* * *

Cait finished the lighting check, stalling for time until Jae arrived.

The two leads were off to the side. Gwen appeared relaxed but Reed looked nervous and, to her own surprise, Cait felt a twinge of sympathy for the actress.

"Yo, Reed." Holly had arrived on the set and had called out across the set.

"Yo, Holly."

Something was launched through the air, and she watched as Reed caught it deftly, then smiled and popped it into her mouth. The writer had continued on her path toward the actress. "That was the most difficult physical act of the afternoon, okay?"

Reed just grunted, but Holly smiled.

Et tu, Holly? Caitlynn thought to herself, perplexed and amused. *What in the bloody hell did I miss in Orlando?*

"Here." Holly held out a box for Reed to help herself from, then passed it to Gwen. "Pups sent them."

Just then Jae came barreling across the soundstage. "Places on walk-through."

The set burst into frenetic activity, and the actresses took up their marks in the doorway while Holly moved to stand next to her and out of her boss' way.

"Action," Jae commanded.

"Dar?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do me a favour?"

"Anything."

"Bend your knees." Gwen slid her arms around Reed's neck and leaned in to kiss the other actress.

Reed went rigid.

"End." Jae walked across to where the actresses were standing. "Okay, Elijah. We need to do something about the wooden Indian imitation."

Cait expected Reed to blow up. Instead the actress merely nodded and kept her eyes locked on Jae, waiting for the director to make a suggestion.

"Get me wardrobe," Jae ordered.

An assistant dresser materialized at Jae's elbow, and the director whispered something in his ear. Within moments he was back with a broad strip of dark cloth, which Jae then wound around the actress' head several times.

"I'm too old for pin the tail on the donkey."

"Maybe. Let's try a version of spin the bottle then, shall we?"

"Excuse me?"

"Spin the bottle—it's a kissing game. Four people are going to kiss you. You try to figure out who."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

"Not with this on, I won't."

"Trust me." Jae then put an arm around Reed's waist and guided her to a table, helping her to sit down.

They whispered something else back and forth, then Reed nodded affirmatively. Cait watched, fascinated. *I would give my right arm to have heard that.*

Holly leaned over. "They have no idea, do they?"

"Nope, clueless. Or in denial." Cait grinned up at the screenwriter. "Maybe we could buy them a clue."

There was a small chuckle and a negative shake of curly locks. "I don't have a big enough limit on all of my credit cards combined to buy Reed a clue."

They stood and watched as Jae walked over to a group of crewmembers and studied them critically before choosing two. She asked them something, then waved them to one side. The director then walked in their direction, smiling mischievously.

“What are you up to now?” Cait asked.

Jae answered, “A little exercise in desensitization.”

“Which means?”

“I need one of you to kiss Reed.”

Cait looked over at the screenwriter and saw a devilish glint in the brown eyes. “Don’t look at me. Thom would pitch a fit.” Which wasn’t true—her fiancé shared her sense of humour—but it made for a good excuse.

“Holly?” Jae pleaded.

“I’ll take a pass too. She’s, umm, not my type.”

“Not your type? C’mom guys. I’m not asking you to sleep with her. Just kiss her. They kiss her, one of you kisses her, Gwen kisses her—and voilà, we show her that a kiss is a kiss is just a kiss.”

“It’s a rose, and the answer is still no.” Cait shook her head for emphasis.

“No?”

“No. As in, not yes.”

Jae scanned the assorted crewmembers and technicians. “Please?”

“You know, you could—just to save time—do it yourself,” Holly suggested, deadpan.

It was all Cait could do to keep from laughing out loud.

“Me?” Jae said in a strangled whisper.

“Sure.” Holly shrugged, offhandedly. “Makes perfect sense. You’re the director,” she added.

“Me?”

“You.” Cait put her hands on Jae’s shoulders and turned her in the direction of the actress.

Jae looked back uncertainly, then walked forward.

“Subtle,” Cait whispered to Holly.

Holly shrugged again.

Cait looked back to the set. This morning she would have sworn they were sleeping together already. But this. What she could see was about a lot more than sex. A whole lot more.

Reed shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden table. She could hear movement around her, the sounds muted by the broad band covering her eyes. Of course she'd be able to tell the difference—if for no other reason than most women lacked stubble—but she decided to humour the director.

And it's not like you haven't kissed a woman before. Somehow though, kissing Jae had been a lot different than kissing Gwen. The brief kiss during rehearsal had been enough for Reed to be able to distinguish her friend from her co-star.

Oddly, she found that she was more reluctant to kiss whoever the men were that Jae had chosen to participate in this little exercise. Having some guy try and shove his tongue into her mouth was not her idea of a fun way to spend time. Men didn't kiss, they tried to dominate.

With her sight removed, Reed found her sense of smell coming into play. A hint of CK1 hung in the air to her left, and she could have sworn the distinctive aroma of Old Spice was layered under it. She could detect the light fragrance that Gwen wore during shooting too. *Maybe that was the goal. This will give me a chance to kiss Gwen from a position of relative anonymity and safety. I can just pretend that I don't know, and no one else around will be the wiser. Brilliant, Tigger.*

There was a slight movement to her right and a voice whispered, "Ready?" She recognized the director before the woman even spoke.

"Are you sure I can't just practice this by kissing my hand? Or eating an ice cream?"

"Reed, I've seen you eat ice cream. Believe me there is nothing erotic about it."

"Right. And the way you inhale food works better?"

Jae laughed. "But we're not talking about me."

"Can't blame a girl for trying." *What would Dar do?* Reed let the line between herself and her character blur again, and decided to just surrender to the role. *Maybe that's the way to play it.* She'd been fighting to retain her own identity, afraid to subsume herself completely in the role. "Right. Let's get this done." Idly she wondered if Jae realized that except for the kiss that they had shared and the scripted ones with Gwen, she hadn't actually kissed anyone for real since before Rio was born, and that she was a little out of practice. *I think they call it performance anxiety.*

Something wet and cold touched her lips, causing a momentary flinch before she grinned in recognition. "Very funny, Jae."

Then with a degree of savoir faire suited to James Bond, she swirled

her tongue around the top of the treat, flicking the peak with the tip. *Nothing erotic about me eating ice cream, hmmm?* Slowly she circled the melting cream, drawing it into her mouth with her lips. Mischievously, she played it for all it was worth, and took as much of the cone as she could into her mouth before pursing her lips and releasing the ice cream gradually. Then she suddenly lunged forward and bit the top off and chewed contentedly. A wet cloth smacked her chest then landed on one leg. She picked it up and wiped the last traces of Ben and Jerry's cream feast from her lips.

Spice man moved close and awkwardly put his hand on the back of her neck. She felt her hackles rise slightly, a little afraid, but didn't stop him. And it most definitely was a him. It wasn't an unpleasant kiss per se, and he was smart enough not to try to French kiss her. She broke the kiss, leaned back and purred, "Next."

Laughter broke across the set and Reed would have winked suggestively had she not been blindfolded. Poor guy was probably beet red, though she could hear the muffled sound of a back being patted in congratulatory glee.

Hair brushed her cheek and soft lips captured hers, gently drawing her into the contact. *A woman.* The smaller woman moved closer and Reed let her hands rest on the small of the woman's back, returning the kiss. It was nice, without threat or urgency. With a degree of surprise, she found she was enjoying it. It tapered off naturally and she drew away. "Thanks, Gwen," she whispered too low for anyone else to hear, and received a light squeeze on her shoulder in return.

Who would be next? Woman or man? Reed couldn't place the next scent at all. *Packing material?* Something hard brushed by her nose, then a tickle crawled over her lips as soft fur brushed over her face. *A stuffed animal. That explained the unique aroma, eau de bruin.* She let the sexiest growl she could muster loose from deep within her throat and kissed the stuffed animal passionately.

"That's going to be a tough act to follow," she quipped.

The set erupted into laughter and some of the crew spontaneously broke into song. "Winnie the Pooh. Winnie the Pooh. Tubby little cubby all stuffed with fluff. He's Winnie the Pooh. Winnie the Pooh. Willy nilly silly old bear."

Relaxed, Reed waited for the next person to take his or her place. A hand gently cupped the back of her head, guiding her into another kiss. The slight nervous tension was gone, and she returned this kiss the way she would a handshake. Though she had to admit she had no idea if she

was kissing a woman or a man. Whoever was kissing her kept the pressure between their lips light, almost a caress rather than an actual kiss, and again she found herself enjoying the act. In fact, she recognized the tell-tale signs that her body was beginning to respond, though not with any degree of passion, just a nice, pleasant background sense of pleasure. This time it was her partner who ended the contact, and she felt vaguely disappointed that it had ended before she could get a sense of the other person's gender.

Before the next lips touched hers she knew who it was. The delicate scent of the borrowed sandalwood soap mixed with Jae's own natural one, identified the director to Reed's heightened senses. Relieved that it wasn't Caitlynn or Holly, she leaned forward, meeting her friend halfway. Jae's touch seemed hesitant and Reed laid one hand on her waist reassuringly and pulled the smaller woman a little closer. Unlike the first time they had kissed, Jae didn't take the initiative, her lips barely moving. *Oh no you don't—this was your idea.* Impishly, she nibbled at the edges of the full lips beneath hers, determined to get a response.

Jae responded, and the kiss deepened with a background sense of connection that had been missing from the others. Intrigued by the differences, Reed gave herself up to the gentle exploration and let go of conscious thought. With crashing clarity, she realized that she had been wanting to do this again since the first time at the hotel in Miami. The arousal from the previous kisses ripened as her lips continued to dance with her partner's, her body betraying the message her mind wanted her soul to believe. Guilt and shame screamed out at her. *No. It's just the situation. Just the movie. I'm Dar, she's Kerry—it's that simple. I'm not like that.* Heart hammering, she wrenched her mouth away from Jae's, waited a minute to give the director time to move away from the table, and then with a calm she didn't feel, casually reached up to remove the blindfold.

The crew was whistling good-naturedly and a measure of the tension that had pervaded the set earlier was gone. Unsure of exactly what she was feeling, Reed didn't dare meet her friend's eyes, afraid of what might be showing in her own. It didn't help that it felt like everyone else's eyes were on her, waiting for her reaction. "I think," she said slowly, "I need a cold shower."

There was more laughter at the joke and then the action around the set picked up again as though what had just happened was nothing out of the ordinary.

“So, could you tell if the first kiss was from a man or a woman?” Jae asked.

“Man—unless you meant the Ben and Jerry’s Best Vanilla.” There was more laughter. On a hunch Reed looked around and spotted Holly cuddling the Pooh Bear that was part of Kerry’s bedroom set. “And we ain’t even gonna talk about bachelor number three.” She got off the table and walked toward the crewmembers, glad for the excuse to move. “Him.” Reed pointed at one of the men Jae had chosen, the wide-eyed shock and red face confirmed her guess.

Jae laughed. “Second?”

“Gwen.”

The blonde actress bowed chivalrously, garnering another round of applause.

Jae looked startled and glanced over. Reed forced herself to meet the green eyes steadily, no hint of her inner turmoil leaking through.

“Number four?”

“No idea.” She left the director an out, though logically she knew it had to be a man.

“Kiss Gwen the way you kissed everyone in the exercise and we can’t miss. Heck, kiss her the way you kissed Pooh.”

The director didn’t seem angry or upset, so Reed relaxed slightly and nodded in agreement.

“Take a break everyone. Be back ready to roll tape in thirty.”

Maintaining the outward appearance of calm, Reed moved unhurriedly toward the exit as soon as Jae had finished speaking, and headed for the safety of the trailer. Once inside, she locked the door and leaned against it, unconsciously trying to bar the demons that chased her across the backlot from following her inside. Not enough sleep, too much stress and too fuzzy a boundary between what was her and what was Dar—it had to be that. She’d done it before, lost herself so completely in a role that it had taken weeks afterwards to climb back out.

It was, now that Reed thought about it, perfectly natural that she would respond to Jae like she had. They’d rehearsed together, and right from the beginning she had had an easier time picturing Jae, rather than Gwen, as Kerry. Reed sat at the small table and stared at the blank screen a moment before reaching across for the mouse. Thoughtfully, she moved it across the neoprene Marvin the Martian mousepad, bringing the monitor to life, and tapped the keyboard.

TWENTY-FOUR

Jae leaned back in her chair as the rushes finished playing. The room was silent as the various members of the cast and crew digested the impact of the footage they had just viewed.

“Wow,” Erich spoke up, starting a wave of comments that filled the small viewing room. The Director of Photography clapped her shoulder.

The editor was shaking his head in admiration. “Incredible, Jae. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything that erotic between two characters, never mind between two women.”

The air in the room was charged with excitement and Jae let the emotion lift her up from her inner turmoil.

“And just think, we haven’t even filmed the sex scene yet.” One of the production assistants added a low whistle to her comment before leaving the room.

There was another round of “well dones” and a few more respectful whistles as the room began to empty. Jae reached over and rewound the tape to watch the rough edit again. Behind her, she could sense that Reed hadn’t yet left the room. The actress was seated unobtrusively in the corner, silently watching the various angles and takes flash across the screen.

The director returned her attention to the film, leaving her concern for the actress to deal with later. She froze the tape, then turned to her editor. “Show me the wide angle starting at 1453.”

“Cued.” The film editor had rewound the tape to the index point requested.

“Roll it.” Jae watched the scene unfold from a slightly different angle and distance than the one frozen on the left side monitor. “I want you to do a cut overlaying these two shots.” She consulted her notepad. “Roll tape A back to index counter 1076. Start with 40 percent opacity. Then cut in this one.” She pointed to a shot of Gwen running her hands over Reed’s strong back.

The director wanted to see what the footage looked like when shown together, both angles and perspectives overlaid.

Normally the first edits of a scene were left to the film editor. As director, she would make her cut from his preliminary one. But this scene was special, and they needed to know what they had and what they still needed before they shot the rest of it.

Brow furrowed in concentration, she sank into the scene, critically

judging the performances of the two actresses. Images of Reed and Gwen reflected from the monitors and cast odd shadows over the equipment and the editing team. Tape was different than live action. Colours were subtly altered, and shadows appeared where previously there were none.

“When we get the full view shots, I want to do the same thing with some of those angles.” The other key was being erotic without being pornographic—how to make the audience part of the scene without making them feel like voyeurs. Consequently, they had decided to film a sexless sex scene—to let the audience imagine what was being done, concentrating instead on creating a feeling. The audience would never know that what they were watching was, in fact, a prolonged massage.

“That might work even better. Cut these into the full length angles and the blending images will help with the illusion.”

Holly was smiling. “Oh, I don’t think you left much doubt.”

Jae laughed. “Yeah, everyone will know what they’re doing—they just won’t know ‘what’ they’re doing.”

In a reversal of normal cinematic trend, she would make any of the more explicit scenes almost casual and remove the novelty factor. That really was the linchpin of the movie. She wasn’t going to make a lesbian film; she was going to film a story that just happened to have lesbian characters.

To that end, the visual relationship between Dar and Kerry was important. Even more important, though, was giving the audience someone to hate more than they hated the idea of a female-female love story. If they could get a tenth as much chemistry between the actor playing Kyle and Gwen as she was seeing between her leads, it would work.

The tape finished rolling for the second time and Jae jotted down a couple of more notes, then stood. “Looks like we’ll have enough.”

“Jae, you shot three cans on this. You have every conceivable angle and shot length. More importantly, you got them to perform. Relax.”

“It’s good, Jae.” Reed added her comment to Erich’s, then left the room.

She’d forgotten the actress was still in the room, and a small smile played on her lips. Reed had come back after the break without any signs of the turmoil Jae had seen earlier in the intense blue eyes.

“Well, well. That may be your biggest accomplishment,” Erich said.

“What do you mean?” She leaned casually against the desktop, trying not to show too much interest.

The Director of Photography waved a hand back at the door in the direction the actress had gone. "That's not the same actress who filmed *Equilibrium*. The actress I remember would never have kissed a stuffed animal—or praised a rush."

"You worked with her?" Jae was curious. She'd seen *Equilibrium*, and enjoyed Reed's portrayal of a scientist with a secret that could destroy the world. The performance had been believable—even if the plot hadn't been.

He nodded. "In fact, she never watched a rush. It was like she just knew when she was on. Pretty intense woman." Erich got out of his chair and made for the door. "I'll see you after the photo shoot tomorrow."

Alone for the first time all afternoon, Jae mulled over her colleague's words. It was interesting to get another person's professional impression of Reed. She laughed. Intense was a good word for the actress.

It had been nice to see a glimpse of the playful side of her friend, though she recognized that Reed had been performing. *Was that kiss a performance?* For a brief moment she had felt connected to the other woman in a way she had never imagined possible.

You're treading a thin line there, m'grrl, a very thin line indeed. You'd best be telling her, and soon.

She turned the lights out and made her way back to her office. "I don't know how to tell her," Jae admitted out loud to herself.

"Tell who what?" Caitlynn was exiting the office, large neatly packed box in hand.

Guessing where her assistant was headed, Jae opened the door that used to be Roan's and stood aside. "Reed."

"Ah." The box was put on the desk, and Cait turned to face her. "Look, I don't much care for her, that's no secret. But then, I'll concede that I don't even know her. What I do see though, is that someone has finally managed to get inside those 'hands off the heart' walls of yours."

"We are just friends." Jae felt compelled to make that assertion.

"You want more."

"Is it that obvious?"

"To someone who's worked with you nearly every day in the past five years? To someone who has been friends with you almost that long? Yeah babe, it's that obvious."

"I don't know what's going on anymore. Everything just seems...." She faltered, searching for the right words.

"Easy when you're together, even the not so easy stuff," Cait supplied.

"Is it like that with you and Thom?" She liked Thom and had been surprised when the easy-going entertainment editor for the Los Angeles Times had seemed to click instantly with her driven assistant, but had never really talked to Cait about it.

"Yeah. It is." Cait had a tiny smile on her lips, eyes alight in quiet joy. "This sounds so corny now, but he balances me, you know?"

"I didn't, but I'm beginning to."

They sat quietly together on the floor, leaning against the big black leather couch in Roan's office, shoulders touching.

"So you going to tell her?"

"That I have feelings for her? No. I don't think either one of us is ready to cover that particular territory."

"You definitely need to tell her you're gay, though. I'm sort of surprised she hasn't already heard."

"I know. I just can't figure out how. Did you tell Thom?"

"That you're gay?"

A deep belly laugh burst from deep inside and Jae let the clean feeling wash over her, taking some of the tension away. "No," she gasped. "That you're bisexual."

"Oh that. Yes, I told him."

"What'd he say?"

"He just looked over at me and said, 'Talk about performance anxiety,' smiled, and that was that."

"Keeper." Jae doubted that that was all that Thom had said, but it made a nice sounding story.

"Definitely." Cait drew her knees up to her chin, then wrapped her arms around them. "If I were you, I'd find out why she's homophobic, then take it from there."

Surprised, she arched a brow and regarded her friend thoughtfully for a few seconds. "Why?"

"Because something isn't adding up. That kiss she gave you today, that doesn't match the vehemence in her voice when she talks about gays. You need to find out if it's garden variety, 'never knew a real life dyke' homophobia, or if it's something deeper—emotional versus intellectual."

"You think she was abused?"

"I think that your friend has some deep cuts, some of which haven't healed over."

"Hmm. Perceptive." She hadn't thought of that. Cait saw things that most people would rather she not see. *Sometimes things I'd rather she not*

see, Jae thought, ruefully.

“Yeah, and cheaper than a therapist. Listen, I have to go meet Thom for dinner. Want to join us?”

“Thanks, but I have to meet the band for rehearsal, prepare for tomorrow’s photo shoot, and double check the layout and interview for Friday. Raincheck?”

“No problem. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Cait. Give Thom a kiss for me, will you?” She gave her friend a quick kiss and left the office.

TWENTY-FIVE

“Unnnhh, unnnhhh, unnnhh....” The alarm cut through the nightmare, rescuing her from the mutated images and stark terror. Reed lay still for a moment, then hit reset. They were getting worse, one terror becoming another, removing the familiar pattern.

It had to have been the interview yesterday. Dredging up the memories of her adolescence—if only to make sure that they stayed buried—had left them too close to the surface. She could tell that Jae had wanted to ask questions. The shocked pain in Jae’s mist green eyes as Heidi’s disembodied voice had come through the speaker phone still lingered in her mind’s eye.

Orphan. Such a simple word. Two syllables. And a life that had never been the same.

Jae had reached into the space between them, taken her hand in silent support and the interview had moved on. The unshared details lingered on as untold memories that haunted her dreams. *Maybe I should have taken Jae up on dinner last night.* Her nightmares were usually less intense if she’d been around the director. In Florida, they’d all but disappeared. The younger woman had the ability to cut through whatever bad mood or funk she was in. *And the wine with dinner wouldn’t have hurt either.*

Instead she’d come home, and spent some time with Rio.

Languishing in bed, Reed replayed the phone call of the night before.

“Hey, kiddo.”

“Mummy. Can I have you first tonight? Please?”

“All yours.”

“Cool.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Can you tell me a story?”

“A story, hunh? Okay. Are you ready for bed?”

“No. But I can do that while you talk. I promise.”

“Hey you....”

“What?” He giggled, recognizing what was coming.

“Who loves you?”

“Mummy does.”

“And don’t you forget it. Now get your jammies on. I’ll wait. I promise.”

"Kay." The phone clattered onto the desk and the sounds of a small boy rushing around filled her ear. A drawer slammed shut, and springs groaned slightly as he hurtled onto the bed, then grabbed the phone. "I'm back."

"Forgot something."

"Aw, Mum. Do I have to?"

"Yes. G'wan. Wash your hands too. But I'll tell you what, you pretend I'm sitting there with you, and I'll tell you about the movie while you brush."

"Deal."

Water ran in the sink and she listened to the wet squishy sounds of her son brushing his teeth. "Hey."

"Whaa?"

"You still got all your teeth? Haven't knocked any out since last time?"

"Ywesh. Aw wwhere," he mumbled around the brush.

"Cool. Thursday they stuck me on a surfboard with my costar and took pictures of me trying not to fall off of it."

A boyish giggle echoed in the bathroom as her son pictured the image. They'd gone to the cape the summer before, and she had paddled them out into the waves, promptly dumping them into the cold Atlantic. He'd decided Geoff was a safer bet, and she'd been relegated to beach patrol.

She pulled the phone away from her ear slightly in anticipation. Rio was almost done and that meant Spit Wars. Curiously, she heard nothing.

"All done," he announced.

"Right. So what kind of story?"

The bathroom was only about twenty feet from his room at Heidi's, but she could hear him wander down the stairs, through the kitchen, poke his head in the pantry before climbing the back set. It was almost like being there; a slice of normalcy tucked into her surreal day.

Reluctantly, she left off the pleasant memory of telling Rio stories until he'd fallen asleep, and got out of bed.

She dug a skirt and tank top out of her suitcase, laying them across the foot of the bed, ready to put on after a quick shower. Twenty minutes later, the last of the beige skirt's thirty-five buttons had been fastened and the coffeepot was perking away in the kitchen.

Critically, she studied her reflection in the mirror, and reached for the small bag of cosmetics on the corner of the vanity. Normally the studio took care of dark circles. This morning, evidence of a bad night's sleep was her responsibility. Skillfully, she applied the cover up, a hint of mascara, then pursed her lips and swiped lipstick across them, adding a splash of colour.

No sooner had she finished than she heard the purr of a car engine filter through the open bathroom window. "Morning," she called out, opening the front door. Jae was just getting out of the Saturn, blonde hair crowned by the sun.

* * *

Two hours later, they had parked the car and, along with Jae's niece and nephew, were winding their way through the ranch style property that was home to this year's Paediatric AIDS Benefit.

A carnival atmosphere ruled the open lawns as stars mixed with children from the various Los Angeles area hospitals. Clowns and mimes wandered the green grass, balloon animals and smiles trailing them.

"Jacqueline, honestly. Look at how you're dressed, and you're late."

"Grandma!" The twins let go of Jae's hands and latched onto their grandmother.

Amused, Reed lifted a questioning brow and Jae shrugged back.

"Morning, Mother," Jae said dutifully.

Reed took a moment to study Jae's mother, aware that the elder Cavanaugh was studying her in turn. A slightly heavier version of Jae stood one hand on her hip, the other clutching a purse that might have held the entire contents of Macy's—it was so large. Every hair was in place, the French braid topped by a tasteful hairpin. Her dress was equally elegant, though casual. *Here is a woman who places great importance on appearances.*

"Did you at least remember to feed them breakfast?"

Reed cut in before Jae could respond, "I don't believe we've met. I'm Reed Lewis." She held her right hand out delicately.

"Elizabeth Cavanaugh," the woman supplied, but continued her evaluative stare.

As far as Reed was concerned, Jae looked fine, and she would have said as much if Jae hadn't looked so distracted. *Later*, she thought.

"Do I meet with your approval?" Reed drawled, not backing down from the appraising once over coming from eyes not quite as green as Jae's.

"I don't choose my daughter's friends, Ms. Lewis."

Something in the elder Cavanaugh's voice indicated that if it were left up to her, Jae would have a very different set of friends.

* * *

Jae listened to her mother spar with Reed and groaned inwardly. Some things never changed. "Mother, what booth are you working this year?" She already knew the answer but was prepared to take whatever chastisement came in exchange for the change in subject. In fact, that was how she had gotten involved with the Paediatric AIDS Benefit in the first place. Her mother had been volunteering since its inception.

"The art auction. We have two new Carol Evans pieces and a Shiazaki."

Evans, Jae had heard of, the other name escaped her.

Her mother continued, "But that's not until six. I will pick the twins up at three, while you perform."

Jae nodded her agreement. She'd rather have left them with Reed, but didn't know if the actress would be finished with her stint serving hot dogs in time. "Thanks. Right now though, I have to go meet the rest of the band. We'll see you later."

Before her mother could object, Jae steered Reed and the twins toward a game booth. The twins raced ahead, good-naturedly arguing about whom would win.

Reed leaned in and whispered, "I dunno, Jacqueline. You look fine to me." Blue eyes twinkled humorously.

For the first time, the three syllables of her real name elicited a tingle rather than a suppressed groan of dismay. "Thanks. You clean up pretty good yourself." *Now that's an understatement.* She'd nearly stumbled getting out of the car as she'd caught sight of the actress earlier. The addition of the brown Stetson had only made the actress more breathtaking. "Funny, how a name can sound so different when someone else says it." It was out before she realized that she'd spoken aloud.

"Yeah, my name never sounded quite the same when my mother said it either." The sadness that had pervaded the room yesterday during the interview and Heidi's revelation that Reed was an orphan was gone from the actress' voice, but Jae squeezed her hand anyway. Again, she resisted the desire to ask what had happened to Reed's parents. Heidi hadn't said, Reed hadn't been allowed to speak during the interview, and this was definitely not the time or place.

"I thought I'd check on how Gwen's doing. She's over at the dunk tank." The blonde actress had decided that if she had to participate, she might as well have fun, so had volunteered to be the mermaid in the dunk tank. "I'll take Aine with me, will you be okay with Alex?"

Reed looked to where Alex was standing, and nodded. "I'd like that.

Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

* * *

“Hey, kiddo, you don’t look like you’re having much fun.” Reed dropped cross-legged onto a blanket next to Jae’s nephew.

Solemn eyes looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before he shrugged and spoke. “I was just thinking about my friend Josh.”

Reed reached for a blade of the short, well-trampled grass and waited for the boy to continue on his own.

“He’s not here this year.”

Just by Alex’s tone, she knew with painful certainty that Josh had been one of the children whom this benefit was intended to help. “You want to go look?”

“Can we?”

“Yes. I have a half an hour or so before I need to dish up hot dogs. Why don’t we find your sister and Jae at the same time?” The director had gone off to prepare for the set the band would play, taking her niece with her.

“Cool.” Excited, he stood, moving lightly on his feet.

Reed followed the path he wove through the increasingly crowded grounds. Occasionally someone recognized her and a few surprised looks were cast in her direction. She ignored them all, focused instead on her young charge.

“You like ice cream?”

“Yes,” Alex answered. His smile widened with anticipation.

“Me too. Let me guess—you’re a chocolate chip cookie dough kind of kid.”

“How’d you guess?”

“My ... a friend of mine likes it. Single or double?” Reed wasn’t ready to mention Rio to Alex yet.

“Double?” he asked optimistically.

“Double it is.” She ordered a double vanilla cone for herself, and paid the extra for dipped waffle cones.

“Ms. Lewis?”

“It’s just Reed. What?”

“Josh!” he yelled, eyes lighting up and reminding her of his aunt. The boy scrambled to greet his friend, ice cream cone and question forgotten.

Reed watched, amused, as the boys stood, hands in their pockets, feet scuffing the ground, as they made the inconsequential small talk designed to cover mutual relief. *And how relieved are you?* she asked herself. Small children and mortality were achingly familiar, and she had held Rio through tears of his own when children he had met in the hospital passed away.

“What is it with you and vanilla ice cream?” In spite of her critique, Jae leaned down and took a mouthful of the cold treat.

Reed arched a brow at her friend and growled, “Mine.”

“Okay. I’ll eat Alex’s then.” Before she could take a bite, the child in question rescued the cone.

“Aunt Jae! That’s mine.” Alex indignantly reclaimed the frozen treat.

“Possessive bunch aren’t we?”

“Hey, Tigger.” Reed held the cone out for Jae to take another mouthful.

“Thanks. I shouldn’t eat any more though. Bad for the singing voice.”

“No problem. Hold that thought.” Reed passed over the ice cream, then went to where the boys were standing. She leaned down and whispered to Alex, then handed him a five-dollar bill to buy the other boy a cone. The two boys headed for the woman Reed presumed was Josh’s mother. Satisfied by the smile that split Josh’s face, she returned her attention to the director.

“If you’re not careful they’re gonna start calling you the Ice Cream Queen,” Jae said.

Reed ducked her head and nibbled at the cone. “And as my first act, I hereby declare a moratorium on bubble gum ice cream.”

“Jacqueline.”

Silence and a slightly guilty look instantly replaced the smile and light laughter of the director. “Mother.”

A light tug on her shirttail diverted her attention from the battle of words, and she looked down to find Josh smiling up at her, blue ice cream decorating his lips, chin and most of his face. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

“Honestly, Jacqueline, you didn’t buy Alex ice cream this close to lunch?”

“Mother—”

“No, Jacqueline didn’t. I did.” She let the name roll off her tongue, softening the syllables, removing the sting from the name that it had when Jae’s mother said it.

"Thank you for your generosity, but that's not how we do things. Ice cream is a dessert."

Taking another bite from the cone Jae still held, Reed made a show of enjoying the taste. "Ice cream is just frozen milk, and milk—it does a body good."

"It's obvious you have no children."

"Time out! Mother, that was uncalled for," Jae cut in. To anyone else, Reed's expression hadn't changed, but she had seen the flicker of pain in the actress' eyes.

"If you'll excuse me." Reed turned and left.

Jae watched the other woman leave, then turned on her mother. "You have no idea. Enjoy the concert."

"Jacqueline—"

"No, this time you've gone too far. I'm going to check on Alex, who is my responsibility today, not yours, and then I'm going to apologize for subjecting Reed to you." Angry, Jae turned away, missing the speculative look on her mother's face. The blonde trotted hurriedly to where Alex and Josh were kicking a soccer ball. "You all right hanging with Josh?"

"Yeah, we're gonna play in the kids' game." He didn't look at her, concentrating instead on getting the ball as close to where Josh was standing as possible.

She ruffled his hair and stole the ball, neatly sending it directly to the other boy's left foot. "I'll be at the stage when you're done, Reed will be at the hot dog booth. Behave yourself."

"I will."

Now, if I were Reed, where would I hide? Good thing I have the car keys. Jae stopped walking, dug her cell phone out of its belt clip and dialed the familiar number.

"Hello."

"You forgot your ice cream." Two small rivulets of melted cream were tracking aimlessly towards her hand, and Jae carelessly swiped her tongue at them before they could make contact with her flesh.

"So I did."

"Are we playing hide and seek, or would you rather be alone?"

"Jae, there are at least five hundred people here so far. I don't think being alone is an option."

"Hide and seek it is then." That got a snort from the actress, and Jae could imagine the slight quirk to the full lips as Reed tried to hide her amusement. "One, two, three, four, five, seven, eight, nine, ten.... Ready

or not, Roo, here I come.” Now the actress was chuckling out loud and Jae disconnected the call, a smile of her own matching the one she was sure that Reed was wearing.

“All right, how many six foot tall women in a brown Akubra style could there be running around here, hmmm?”

“You talking to yourself again, Hollywood?” One of her bandmates, Mare, fell into step beside her. Stocky, and darker than Jae, Mare was a teacher during the week.

“Yep,” Jae agreed, continuing to scan the crowd for Reed.

“Cait and Thom coming?”

“Yeah. They should be here in an hour or so. Why?” Everybody came to this thing. It was the place to be seen.

“I need to talk to Cait.”

“Unh-hunh.” *There.* Just beside the pony ring, a long body casually leaned against the wooden fence. *Now, how do I sneak up on her, without being seen?*

She was still fuming internally over her mother’s treatment of Reed. It was one thing when her choices and life were being scrutinized and found lacking, but she wasn’t going to let her friends be attacked. Not any more.

“Just don’t be late, okay?”

“I won’t.” Jae walked around the small barn, hoping to approach from Reed’s blind side.

“Is that her?”

“Her?”

“The chica who has you smiling. Mierda, Jae, but she is something.”

“It’s not like that. We’re just friends. I’m not her type.”

“For a woman like that, I would make myself her type,” Mare joked.

“That would take about twenty-thousand dollars and four operations. But I’ll take it under advisement.” Vanilla ice cream was beginning to grow on her, and Jae took another long swipe at the nearly finished cone.

“Later.” Mare gave a small wave and split off, heading back toward the parking lot.

“Bye, Mare.” In the time it had taken to say goodbye, Reed had disappeared, and Jae looked around in confusion. She was just there. In the pony ring, children were being led around the sawdust paddock, bright smiles on their young faces.

“Hello,” a low voice drawled in her ear, nearly sending the cone flying as she jumped in surprise.

"Ahh ... Reed!" Jae turned to face her friend. One eyebrow was cocked in jaunty humour, and blue eyes twinkled in mirth. "How do you do that?"

"Magic. A little fairy steps out from behind a tree, sprinkles me with pixie dust, and voilà." The actress snapped her fingers in the air.

Reed didn't seem any worse for wear after the verbal run-in with her mother, but Jae knew that just because nothing showed on the outside, didn't mean that the waters were calm on the inside.

"When I was a kid, the other girls in the neighborhood would have sleepovers. A bunch of us would just crash at someone's house. We'd do the pizza and all night movie thing. Cora's parents had a Beta machine, and I remember watching *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and having trouble with the ground sausage topping. We were so terrified, but it was fun. I never had a sleepover at my house." Jae stopped walking and was looking out over the lush green foliage of Griffith Park. "That's not true. I had one." She looked over at the actress. "My mother means well, but she is very wrapped in ought to's and should be's."

"S'okay, Jae. I should have asked before pumping him full of ice cream."

"No. I left him in your care. My mother has to accept that she can't control everything, or me. And that little display was directed more at me than you."

"How come you let her call you Jacqueline?"

Reed offered her the last of the waffle cone, and she opened her mouth allowing the actress to pop it neatly between her teeth. "That, Roo, is a very good question." Though if more people would pronounce it like Reed did she might just reconsider using it.

"It suits you, you know."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I do."

* * *

Jae's band struck the opening chords to the first number, and Reed could see the various band members looking out over the crowd as they gauged the audience's reaction. They had decided to start with something upbeat and boppy, to get the kids interested. 'Twist and Shout' had won out over 'Walking on Sunshine' and 'Kharma Chameleon'. Small mercies, she supposed.

The opening strains of 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' dropped onto the

crowd's ears. Applause thundered, drowning the song's final notes. Jae sat on a stool and began picking out the chords of an Indigo Girls cover. Reed couldn't recall the title, but it was familiar from the time in the hotel in Orlando. The other guitarist waved to the crowd, inviting them to sing along. The words of the chorus washed over the listening crowd and gathered them up, connecting the audience to each other with a common thread of music. Unconsciously, she found, then locked eyes with Jae.

"... So we're okay, we're fine. Baby, I'm here to stop your crying, chase all the ghosts from your head. I'm stronger than the monster beneath your bed, smarter than the tricks played on your heart. We'll look at them together, then we'll take 'em apart. Adding up the total of all that's true. Multiply life by the power of two...."

The words had taken on a new meaning since she'd first heard them, and Reed smiled back at Jae. She stretched her feet out in front of her and leaned back on her hands. Next to her, Aine, Alex and Josh were stretched out finishing the last of a late lunch. She'd finished her turn serving hotdogs and had happily taken on the task of keeping an eye on the boys and Aine. She was pretty sure that Riordan would like Alex. *Maybe when I say hi later, I'll introduce them.*

Movement to the side of the stage caught her eye, and Reed looked over; her eyes were met with a thumbs-up and a cheeky grin. She nodded and smiled, then tapped Alex lightly on the foot. "Hey, Kiddo, watch this."

Up on stage, Jae switched from the acoustic to steel electric and began the opening riffs to another song. The spotlights danced around the director before coming to rest just behind the blonde, the backlighting making her appear burnished and golden. Another guitar wound its notes around the main riff, and Reed smiled as the other two guitarists looked around in confusion. Jae was so focused on her music that she simply adjusted and carried on. It wasn't 'til the crowd started to scream that Jae turned her head to look at her bandmates.

Reed was close enough that she could see the shocked widening of the emerald green eyes as the director spotted Melissa Etheridge, who had joined them on the stage.

"Mind if I join you?" Melissa Etheridge's low throaty drawl floated out from the stage.

The rest of the band had recovered, and everyone was now playing an improvised intro to the song. Jae shook her head and moved aside to share her mike, a look of wonder and joy on her face.

Satisfied, Reed leaned back again to enjoy hearing Jae play with one of her idols.

“Tell me, does she love you like the way I love you? Does she stimulate you attract and captivate you? Tell me, does she miss you existing just to kiss you.... Like the way I do?”

“Tell me, does she want you, infatuate and haunt you? Does she infect you, seduce you and affect you.... Like the way I do?”

The two women wove their voices around each other. Jae’s contralto was a perfect foil for the huskier voice of her companion.

“Can I survive all the implications? Even if I tried, could you be less than an addiction? Don’t you think I know there’s so many others, who would beg steal and lie, fight, kill and die.... Just to hold you like I do?”

“Tell me, does she love you like the way I love you? Does she stimulate you attract and captivate you? Tell me does she miss you, existing just to kiss you.... Like the way I do?”

An appreciative roar swelled from the crowd back to the stage, as they became aware that they were being treated to something special. The band members were clearly enjoying themselves, and it seemed that Jae radiated excitement.

Jae’s rich voice carried the chorus through alone the second time. “Nobody loves you like the way I do. Nobody wants you like the way I do. Nobody needs you like the way I do. Nobody aches just to hold you. Like the way I do.”

“Tell me, does she love you, like the way I love you? Does she stimulate you? Attract and captivate you? Tell me, does she miss you, existing just to kiss you.... Like the way I do?”

“Tell me, does she want you, infatuate and haunt you? Does she infect you, seduce you and affect you.... Like the way I do?”

The last notes trickled away, and Jae leaned over to speak to the other woman, then shot a quick glance out in Reed’s direction. Busted. The director had obviously figured out she had had something to do with the temporary addition to the band. Reed smiled and winked though she knew Jae was too far away to see it.

Echoes of emotion reverberated in the air after the final notes had fallen silent. Jae leaned forward and spoke into the microphone. “Thank you.”

The words were for the crowd, but the sentiment was for her, and Reed whispered quietly, “You’re welcome.”

TWENTY-SIX

Her cell phone chirped, and Reed languidly reached into her haversack for the slim Nokia. "Hello."

"Hey," Heidi answered.

The actress looked at her watch, then tucked it back into a pocket; the call was early. "Rio around?"

"Ayup. Out in the yard with Finnegan."

"He rideable yet?" Rio had watched an old Disney re-run of 'The Swiss Family Robinson' and had decided that if Ernst could ride an ostrich, he could ride a sheep. It was one of the few animals to which he wasn't allergic.

"Barely. Geoff's with him. Heard anything about the interview?"

"No. But Thom Dixon is supposed to drop off his version today, and then it's wait and see how bad the 'Up Close' one is." She turned her back slightly to the boys, one eye still on the stage. "This isn't a really good time for this. I'll call you later and let you know."

"Right. You want me to get Rio?"

"Later. I want to introduce him to someone. They can do the RPG thing."

Heidi perked up, interested. "Sounds cool. You meet someone?"

What would the answer to that one be? Yes. And No. "No. Nothing like that. Jae's nephew is with me. I just thought they'd get along. Give me a half hour or so, then we'll sneak off." The music on the stage was winding down, the last strains drowned out by the yells and applause of the audience. Jae would be down soon, then they could slip off for a bit. *Thank God for unlimited weekend cellular.*

"If you say so. Later then."

"Bye." *What in the hell was that supposed to mean?* She'd have to remember to ask later. The next act was being introduced and the various members of the band had descended the stairs to the right of the stage.

What's up with Jae? The director had a grim light in her eyes and the smile on her lips seemed tight to Reed. Next thing she knew, a mob surrounded the blanket. Caitlynn Waters and Thom Dixon had arrived, along with Jae's mother. She half expected Holly to pop up at any moment, except she knew that the screenwriter had headed up to San Jose to visit friends.

"You okay?" she whispered as Jae settled onto the ground next to her.

"Fine. Just a little overwhelmed, I guess. How'd you pull that off anyway?"

"I just asked. Nothing fancy."

"You just asked?"

"Yep. A polite 'Hello my name is ... would you consider ...' sort of email."

"You're something else, Roo." Alex climbed into his aunt's lap and she ruffled his hair. "G'wan, go bug Thom for a bit. I need to talk to Reed."

Alex got up obediently, and to Reed's surprise gave her a quick hug before dashing after the tall reporter.

"Cute kids."

Jae watched them for a minute. "Yeah, probably as close to parenthood as I'll get, so I make the most of it."

Over Jae's shoulder, Reed could see Elizabeth Cavanaugh watching them intently. Feeling protective of her friend, she slid closer. "Well, they are pretty lucky." She looked over to where Alex and Aine were wrestling with Thom and Josh, and made her decision. "You want to meet Rio?"

Startled green eyes revealed the answer before the words left the director's lips. "I'd like that."

"C'mon. I left the laptop in the car."

"You brought your laptop? Most people carry a book, you know."

"Ha ha." Reed stood and reached down a hand, hauling the director to her feet. She pulled a little too hard, and nearly ended up back on the ground with the director on top of her.

"Whoa," Jae laughed, her breath tickling the side of Reed's neck.

The actress suppressed an involuntary shudder. "Sorry." Green eyes were locked on hers and for a minute, she experienced a disorienting shift in time and place.

"No problem."

Together they set out in the direction of Jae's car, across the teeming sea of sun-worshipping bodies.

* * *

Elizabeth Cavanaugh watched her daughter leave. Jacqueline was engaged with the actress in ways that she wasn't used to seeing from her daughter. It was like Reed commanded Jacqueline's full attention, and when they talked, it was as still as she had ever seen her youngest child.

Jacqueline had been different right from day one. The intelligent,

calm gaze of the newborn had met her own tired eyes and Elizabeth had known that this child of hers was as different from her as two people could get.

There wasn't a box for her daughter. No safe place for the young woman to hang her identity. Jacqueline would have been surprised to learn that her sexuality hadn't been a secret since she had entered puberty. She'd tried to teach Jacqueline how to at least fake the box—tried to give her the tools to blend in. So she'd tried to force dance lessons and piano, tried to instill a respect for the family traditions and rituals. But her daughter had wanted no part of it, content to follow the path that only she could see.

Always her daughter seemed to be looking for something that somehow managed to stay just out of reach. Even her father, though he indulged her, never really understood Jacqueline. None of them did. *No one except my father—and then only mother seemed to come close to understanding him.* Watching the retreating slender form, she wished that he were still alive.

Standing in the hot afternoon sun, she continued to stare at the disappearing form of her daughter and her new lover. *Would this one work?*

“Jacqueline honey? Are you up here?”

A small voice answered quietly, “Yes.”

She could hear the pain in her daughter's tone, could almost see the tears that she knew must be running down the youngster's cheeks. Something had happened at the dance, and Elizabeth fervently wished her husband were home. “You need to talk about it?”

“Love sucks.”

“Sometimes.” She climbed the rest of the way into the attic, settled down against a pillar and just waited for the adolescent to continue in her own.

She hadn't known it then, but that night was the first of many disappointments for her daughter, and somewhere along the line it had broken her heart to see such pain in her child's eyes, so she'd stopped disagreeing with Jacqueline. The next time, Elizabeth had just nodded and told the girl that not everyone had to have a partner to be complete, that some people were meant for other things.

Is this my fault? Had she unwittingly contributed to Jacqueline's inability to sustain a relationship? Had she helped create a self-fulfilling

prophecy? Maybe it wasn't too late to fix.

* * *

Her mind in turmoil, Jae walked next to Reed. *Will I lose this?* They were walking almost shoulder to shoulder, and several times Reed had rested her hand on the small of Jae's back, guiding her through the growing crowd. It surprised her how much she craved that simple contact—contact without ulterior motive or expectation—and now, she might lose it.

Not that Reed hadn't surprised her several times today with a complete lack of reaction to some things she was sure would set the actress off. Like openly gay couples. Or seeing sick children. No, on second thought, that didn't surprise her at all.

"Penny for your thoughts." Reed's low voice cut through her distracted musings.

"Umm, sorry." She would have to tell Reed today. But for now, she wanted to enjoy the easy camaraderie.

"How good is Alex at keeping a secret?" It was another of Reed's abrupt conversational changes.

"About as good as your average nine year old. Why?"

Reed smiled down at her. "I was thinking of letting him do the RPG thing with Rio."

"I'm not sure what an RPG thing is, but I know if it has anything to do with computers, he'd love it."

"Role-playing games. Why don't you boot up the computer, connect the cell like I showed you, and I'll be right back." Reed handed over her cell phone.

"I suppose I could manage that," she said dubiously. "But wouldn't it make more sense if you booted up and I went to get Alex?"

"It would, if I didn't need to make a side trip to the facilities. You boot up, and when I get back, I'll set up with Rio and you can go get Alex."

"Sounds like a plan."

They had reached the car and Jae unlocked the trunk, removing Reed's pack and opening the cooler tucked under the rear edge. "Thirsty?"

"Yes." Blue eyes peered curiously into the dim recesses of the trunk, then lit up as she spotted something. "Jones' Cream Soda? I didn't know you could get that here."

Jae laughed and fished out a bottle of the clear pop. "You can't. I shot

a film in Vancouver, and acquired a taste for it. A friend sends them FedEx.”

“You have nice friends.”

“I like to think so,” Jae said quietly. She held Reed’s eyes and was rewarded with a faint blush.

“Be right back.”

The director shook her head in amusement as Reed scrambled away from the car. She grabbed a blanket from inside the trunk and moved over to a shady area under a large tree. Opening her own soda, she leaned back against the smooth trunk and unzipped the laptop case. A slight breeze ruffled her hair, and Jae took a moment to just breathe in the air and absorb the day.

The whirring of the hard drive mixed seamlessly with the sounds of life around her. It was, she thought, a perfect moment. Then she tucked away the calm joy and turned her attention back to the task at hand.

The cell connected without difficulty, and she found the web browser easily, a simple double click opening up the World Wide Web. *Ooo, this is interesting.* Under bookmarks, she’d found a series of intriguing names, including Holly’s. She clicked on one and the machine chimed at her, so she tried another with the same result.

“Stupid machine,” she muttered under her breath.

“What’s wrong?”

Guiltily, she jumped, not having heard the actress return. “I can’t get to this link.”

“Why not?”

“Like I’d know—it’s your computer.”

Reed sat down next to her, body slightly behind the smaller one, and peered over Jae’s shoulder at the screen. “Ah.” She typed a few keystrokes, bringing up the page Jae had been trying to access. “Net Nanny.”

“Net Nanny?”

“It’s a program to keep Rio out of sites that he’s not supposed to be in.”

Curious about what Reed had been reading that would have triggered the Net Nanny, Jae started to read. The link had obviously picked up in the middle of a story, and as she read, she resisted the impulse to look up at Reed. *Holy cow.... Okay, how do I let her off the hook here? On the other hand, is this the opening I’ve been looking for?*

“I um found them while looking for more of Holly’s stuff.” Reed was looking at the grass, hands twisting about a flat blade.

The intermittent whirring of the computer's hard drive underscored the shallow, even breathing of the actress. "You and your research," Jae smiled, and then casually opened a link she recognized the name of. "I love these things. Thom put the laugh on Cait's answering machine, cracked everyone up." Dancing gophers began to line the screen and she giggled. A soft exhalation of air from the body next to her told Jae that she had made the right call.

"Rio likes those too."

She'd have given anything to know what was going on behind those inscrutable blue eyes, but the moment passed. "I'll be right back." Jae squeezed Reed's shoulder and headed off to grab her nephew.

Leaning back on her elbows an hour later, she smiled to herself. Rio and Alex weren't the only ones who got on well. Every time Alex looked at the actress, hero worship fairly shone from his pale eyes. *The ultra-loaded laptop didn't hurt her case, either.* Reed was lounging by her side, eyes closed, hands folded neatly over her tummy, and Jae indulged herself for a minute, just studying the other woman.

The tightness from the morning was gone, and Jae was sure that Reed was enjoying herself. She let her eyes sweep along the lightly muscled arms and over the tanned length of well-formed legs that showed beneath the casual skirt, then back up again, only to fall into the wide open gaze of her friend. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," Reed responded, a slight smile hanging on her lips.

"We should be getting back before they send out a search party."

"Well we did bring a chaperone." Catlike, she rolled onto her stomach and looked up at Jae through bangs that hung sloppily in her eyes.

Without thinking, Jae reached over and gently tucked the stray locks back out of the way. "Ummm, someone had to come keep the two of you out of trouble." *There is no way I'm going there, unh-unh, Chicken, m'grrl? Bawk, Bawk.*

"Smartass."

They were both smiling as Jae took the opening and responded to the running joke. "Yeah, but I'm your smartass."

"Why Jac-que-line, I do declare. Whatevah would your grandmother say?" Reed teased.

"I'm going to get you for that." Without thinking, Jae pounced on the actress, intending to pin the woman to the ground, and instead finding the tables turned.

"You will, will you?" An amused smirk decorated Reed's face as she purred the words.

"Alex! Help." She lifted her hips off the ground in an attempt to dislodge the actress and succeeded only in giving Reed an open target.

The boy laughingly jumped in, and soon they were a tangled mess of arms and legs. Reed's hands brushed over Jae's sides and she gasped as the sensations registered in her brain and on her body. The skin under her fingers was soft; the light muscles supple as the actress twisted to avoid being tickled. At last their eyes met, and Reed winked. Then, by unspoken consent, they both turned on Alex and made him squirm under the combined assault of their fingers.

"Uncle, uncle!"

"You don't have any uncles," Jae teased, slacking off the attack of her fingers and letting him draw breath.

"Auntie, auntie!"

Jae sat back on her heels and allowed him to sit up.

Reed reached over and tweaked his nose. "C'mon, I think I need another ice cream cone after that. Why don't you fold up the blanket and stuff?"

"Cool." Alex scrambled to his feet and tried to neatly fold the blanket.

Jae looked down at her friend, surprised to see tears forming in the corners of her eyes. "You okay?"

"Never better." There was a moment of silence before Reed continued. "I needed that. I miss him so much sometimes."

"He's a very lucky little kid."

"I'm the lucky one." Then Reed was up and in motion, taking one end of the blanket from Alex and helping him to stow it in the car.

"Last one back's a rotten egg," Alex called over his shoulder, already headed back towards the Benefit and its carnival-like atmosphere.

"Oh, he's clearly your nephew all right." Reed took off running after him, long legs rapidly eating up the distance.

Jae locked the car and broke into a run. Up ahead, she saw Reed reach down, pluck Alex off the ground, and swing him onto her shoulders. "Looks like it's a tie, tiger," she heard Reed tease Alex.

"Not quite, Roo." Jae laughed, poking Reed in the tummy as she flew past toward the area where her friends and family were still lounging.

She looked around the group for Aine, and instead of her niece, she saw Becky talking with her mother. Intent on leaving before she was spotted, Jae turned quickly and stumbled.

Next thing she knew, Reed had a firm grip on her arm, preventing what would have been a nasty fall to the ground. "You all right?"

"Fine." Which was the exact opposite of the truth.

Becky's amber eyes—narrowed with malice—pinned her in place, and Jae swallowed convulsively. A sickly sweet smile was displayed, and a matching quirk of an eyebrow sent the director a detailed message.

It was like watching an edit frame by frame through a tape machine. Jae could see every detail. Could see the wind as it batted stray locks of hair around Becky's head. She could see the faint pinkening of her ex-lover's alabaster skin as rage and hurt spread, leaving flushed skin in its wake, along with the rise and fall of the dress over a chest struggling to contain its breathing and keep to a regular rhythm. And so, too, could she see the malice shift and change to confused hurt. To her left she could feel the heat of Reed's body. Could sense the almost preternatural quickening of the other woman's breathing in response to the situation. Reed seemed taller somehow, as though she was responding to the intangible shift in atmosphere and picking up on the unspoken threat.

Jae looked around for Cait. Nothing. She was on her own. *Please don't do this, Becky*, she silently implored the tall, willowy woman, pleading with her eyes in lieu of words she couldn't say aloud.

"Why, hello. I don't believe we've met." Becky held out a hand towards Reed. "Rebecca Devereaux. I'm an old friend of Jae's."

Reed took the proffered hand, every nerve in her body throbbing with the tension she could almost see hanging in the air around them. *What the hell?* "Reed Lewis."

"Becky!" Aine called excitedly.

"Hello, Aine. I see you've let your hair grow, it's nice." The tension lessened somewhat as Jae's niece came to stand with them.

"Do you really like it?"

"Would I lie to you?"

Reed felt like she was missing something. Jae was standing almost rigid, her green eyes warily tracking the movements of the Devereaux woman, occasionally scanning the crowd behind them as though looking for reinforcements. The tension in the blonde's shoulders seemed to lessen slightly, and Reed followed her gaze to find Caitlynn Waters bearing down on the group.

In child-like contrast, Alex was scuffing the dirt with one foot as he alternated glances between her and the ice cream stand, his interest and priorities far removed from the current situation. Reed winked at him and mouthed, "In a minute." She wasn't sure whose tender mercies it would be crueler to leave Jae to—those of a woman with whom the director obviously had some issues, or Elizabeth Cavanaugh's.

Aine hugged the woman she'd called Becky. "How come you didn't

come with us for breakfast this morning?"

"Cause Reed is Aunt Jae's girlfriend now, dummy," Alex supplied, shaking his head at Aine.

Reed nearly lost the meaning of the words in the dazzling smile the boy gave her. Her own shock was mirrored in the silent stares of the people surrounding her. Then the silence fell prey to the roaring heartbeat in her ears as the information sank in and understanding dawned. *Jae is gay.*

There was frenzied movement around her, and she registered that the children had been whisked away. *This is not happening; it's not true; can't be true.* Jae's silence confirmed the stark truth of the innocent words. But she needed to hear it. Needed the evidence of betrayal made plain. "Is it true? Are you gay?" she asked, the calm tones surprising even her.

"Yes." The admission came as a quiet whisper, and Reed avoided contact with the blonde's eyes. Everything seemed far away; people, distant surreal images that flowed like a Salvador Dali painting.

A lilting laugh cut into the hammering thunder beating at her ears and brought the world back into momentary focus. "Out of the mouths of babes."

Without thinking, Reed grabbed the other woman's arm momentarily preventing her from leaving, then released it. Jae didn't deserve defending. Deliberately, she turned on a heel and walked away. *Don't think about it, just walk, one step at a time.* She repeated the mantra over and over again, moving farther away from the emotional carnage of what had been a close to perfect day.

"Reed, please!" Jae had come around in front of her. "Stop, please."

It was the performance of a lifetime, but somehow she managed to keep moving, to keep her temper in check.

Jae reached out and grabbed her arm. "Reed—"

"Don't touch me." She yanked her arm away from the smaller woman.

"I tried."

"Tried to what? Seduce me?" They were away from the crowds now, and Reed let some of the anger she felt surface.

"It wasn't like that."

"Wasn't it?" She stepped forward into the director's personal space and backed Jae up against a car. Projecting all the edgy menace in her repertoire, Reed leaned in and purred, "This is what you wanted, isn't it?" Their bodies were so close that another inch would be enough to meld them into a single unit.

"Bodies and talent, remember, Jae? Is it my body? Do you want me,

Jae?" she purred silkily, every inch the vixen, then closed the gap and brought her mouth down on Jae's, ignoring the pang of conscience that echoed under the anger and fear.

Reed could see pain and fear reflected from the eyes she had found open and guileless, but Jae said nothing, made no further attempt to explain away the unforgivable. Her own anger rose in response, driving her to lash out at Jae and hurt her as deeply as possible. To give away some of her own pain. Roughly she kissed the director, drawing a confused response, then abruptly broke away. "Or my talent?" They were both breathing raggedly, the heaving of their chests prolonging the physical contact between them.

"Roan couldn't have had a better pupil. You learned your lessons well." With that, she moved away from the car and the silent tears of the woman who had broken through walls only to destroy her soul.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The hot metal of the car seared through the thin material of her shirt and left tracks of fire on her back, but Jae was oblivious to the physical pain. Without realizing it, she came to rest on the ground, sharp stones and twigs failing to penetrate the shock.

It was the last thing she had expected. The last place she had thought the information would come from. *I didn't even realize they knew.* Becky had been right. Out of the mouths of babes. It would be funny if it didn't hurt so much—that even Alex had been able to see what neither she or Reed had been willing to acknowledge.

Her mouth still hurt; she could feel the ghost-like imprint of Reed's mouth on hers. It had all been in that simple, savage kiss. Everything she had lost.

But that wasn't what hurt the most.

No, what hurt the most was Reed's completely shuttered blue eyes. Eyes that had once been open to her were now firmly shut, the woman behind them once again hidden.

"Jae?" Cait called softly.

"Here." *Nowhere. What were the words to that Auden poem again? Pour away the ocean, sweep up the wood. For nothing now can e'er come to any good.*

"You okay?"

She didn't even try to pretend. "No," she admitted quietly. "I'm not."

Her friend came to sit next to her and reached over with one hand. Jae flinched back from the touch. "Don't."

Cait let her hand fall away, and for a moment Jae regretted her sharp tone. "Okay. Your mother took the twins back with her.... What?"

Jae jerked her head up. Had her mother been privy to the final scene with Reed? She tried to remember whereabouts Elizabeth had parked, but she couldn't seem to think. "Did they come this way?"

"No."

She nodded.

Cait tilted the director's jaw upwards before Jae could stop the motion. "Does that question have anything to do with why your lip is bleeding?" Brown eyes were locked on hers as she struggled to find an answer. She took too long. "Bitch. I swear, Jae, if I could whack that woman, I would. She had no right."

"She had every right."

"To hit you? No, Jae. No one has that right."

"She didn't hit me. Now just drop it." Except her own anger was beginning to rise now, and fresh tears of frustration threatened to spill over. *I need to get out of here.* Abruptly she stood and waved off Caitlynn. "I don't need a babysitter. I'll be fine."

And she would have been if, when she opened the door of the Saturn, she hadn't been hit by a blast of sandalwood. Through a haze of tears she started the car and aimlessly left behind the shattered remnants of her perfect afternoon.

* * *

Caitlynn walked slowly back to where the rest of the group waited. *This is bad. Very bad.* She'd never seen Jae quite like that. The blonde had actually flinched away from something as she'd gotten into her car. And the look of utter desolation that had replaced the fire she was accustomed to seeing in the bright, vivid eyes of green was almost more than she could bear to see.

Wordlessly, she walked up to Thom and let him enfold her in a tight hug, burying her face against his chest, just taking in his solid reality and the tangible warmth he radiated.

"She's so alone right now."

"I think they both are," Thom said quietly.

She hadn't considered that. The trickle of blood on the side of Jae's mouth had wiped whatever sympathy she had had for Reed right out of existence. "It bites, Thom."

"Yeah. It does." He squeezed a little tighter and kissed the top of her head.

"Shit. What if she does another runner?" That was the other distinctly possible outcome of today's little brouhaha. Reed would just up and quit. It wasn't like she hadn't done it before—and over something much less volatile—she'd simply gotten tired of a bedmate-cum-pimp.

"I think that is the least of your problems."

"You're right. Jae just seemed so small, like she'd been kicked in the stomach."

"Hon, I know you're biased, but Reed didn't look much better. I don't think I've ever seen the blood drain out of someone's face faster than it did from hers. She looked like she'd been pole-axed."

Cait nestled against his side and walked toward his car, still tucked comfortably under his arm. "I think that tomorrow morning is going to

be very interesting. I can see it now, 'Director Killed by Modem-wielding Actress'."

"The 'Up Close' article is due out tomorrow," Thom reminded her.

"Oh goody. This just goes from bad to worse. You may have more damage control to help with than we thought if what happened today gets out."

"Not if, babe. This is Hollywood. It's just a matter of when."

"So Jae discovered," she said ruefully. It would figure that when Jae finally made an honest emotional connection with someone, it would be founded on such a devastating dishonesty. Suddenly she was tired, the implosion having sucked as much energy from her as it had from the principals. Even Becky had looked shocked by what had happened. "Thom?"

"Yeah, hon?"

"Take me home." She needed very much to be reminded that there was love, that there were happy endings, and that maybe, if she had one, then Jae would get one too. Even if her choice was Reed Lewis.

* * *

No keys. No wallet. *No fucking clue where in the hell I am.*

Now there's an understatement.

Reed stopped walking and just stood by the side of the road. The cell was in its belt clip, the weight bouncing against her hip as she walked, a reminder that help was a phone call away—if she had had someone to call.

Suck it up. It's not the first time you've had to fend for yourself. Below her, she could see the activity of Hollywood proper. Cars and people buzzed along Sunset and then up to Hollywood Boulevard in an endless circuit, the Saturday night ritual already in progress despite the early hour. It would, she judged, take about an hour and a half to reach the commercial sections versus at least three to get to her house.

"Information. What city please?"

"Hollywood."

"Thank you. What listing?"

"Money Mart."

"Thank you. Please hold for that number." The mechanoid voice paused, and Reed could hear the faint clicking of a line being transferred. "The number is 213-555-7917." She disconnected without waiting for the offer to be connected to the number for a small fee. One-

handed, she dialed the Money Mart and got the address and business hours.

It struck her as funny that the Money Mart was only a couple of miles away from where she was standing, yet was a long distance call, whereas the next number—clear on the other side of the country—was a local one.

“Chappelle residence.” Geoff’s strong voice sounded in her ear.

“It’s me. I need you guys to call this number: 213-555-7917, and wire them some money.”

“Reed, what’s wrong?” The background noise was muffled, and she suspected Geoff was calling his wife over.

“Nothing. So don’t worry Heidi.”

“Reed....”

“I said nothing’s wrong. I just lost my keys and wallet. No big deal.”

“Okay.” He sounded unsure, but didn’t press. “Which account and how much?”

“The new chequing one.” It was Saturday night, Jae had her stuff and she was due on set in the morning. Knowing the director, the woman would come after her. “Four hundred.” The cell started to chirp insistently, warning her of low battery level. “Fuck. I need to go. I’ll call from the hotel.”

Arriving at a hotel without a wallet, vehicle or luggage severely reduced the options of where you could stay in this town. Outside her window, she could see the battered, defunct neon sign that told the world that this was the Chesterfield Hotel. She’d paid a week in advance, ten bucks extra for her own bathroom, five bucks for sheets and five more as deposit on a second pillow.

It wasn’t much. It wasn’t even cozy. But the door locked, and best of all, it was the last place anyone would look for her. With the bed made up, she had nothing left to do—no immediate crisis or problem to solve—and the afternoon came crashing down on her again.

How could I have been so fucking stupid?

She was your friend.

NO! She used me. Played me like a fish. And I fell for it completely.

Are you sure you didn’t fall for her?

She pulled the pillow over her head in a useless effort to drown out the mocking internal voice. It sure as hell explained a lot though. *And to think, I was beginning to blame myself for what was happening. It was her.*

Right. It was her fault you got so turned on you needed to seek relief in the shower. Riiight. The thing she hated most about the antagonistic little

voice was how clearly she could hear the sarcastic drawl—and how much it sounded just like she did.

“I don’t need to think. I need a fucking drink. Or ten.” The image in the mirror failed to contradict her, so she headed out the door, taking care that it was locked securely behind her.

It should have been relatively easy to buy alcohol in a state that sold it in corner stores. But for some reason her mind refused to co-operate, and she’d been to a half dozen stores before she’d been able to choose something. She’d even lost track of how long she’d been wandering around the squalid streets of Hollywood.

Gum spattered stars with bronze icons lined the sidewalks and served as tangible proof of the deification the public awarded the bright lights and big stars. The streets were filling up; the doorways and eateries much more crowded than in her last couple of circuits. In her hand, the plastic bag with plastic cups and plastic courage began to cut into her palm, the weight pressing the handles into her skin.

The bright cacophony of the city streets hurt her ears, hurt her head and grated on her nerves, but the silence of the hotel room was worse; so Reed forced herself to keep walking until finally she couldn’t take the press of people and noise anymore.

She cut up along Vine and walked back along Hollywood Boulevard. Sleek racing bikes that had never been out of the city carried their cargo of buff men and underdressed women in an unending stream; convertibles crammed to capacity with college co-eds crawled by; pedestrians wove in and out of the parade of humanity on display. Reed watched them all, the intoxication they felt at being part of the mass spectacle lost on her. There were whistles and invitations, but none of it touched her.

The dirty concrete steps of the hotel were in front of her; somehow she must have turned onto North Hudson, but she didn’t remember doing it. In her room, Reed left the lights off and sank into a battered chair that smelled vaguely of bleach, vomit, urine and cigar smoke.

She’d bought cigarettes but didn’t bother to light one. Instead she poured a generous amount of Ol’ Granddad into a plastic cup. The first swallow stung and cut at her throat, but she downed the whiskey anyway.

Outside, the wind had picked up with the setting of the sun, and the blinds banged against the chipped windowsill. Reed suddenly felt the need to see the stars, and it depressed her that she couldn’t.

No stars, no water or waves.

Wonder if that's where Jae is?

Angrily, she crushed the plastic cup, annoyed to have Jae invade her thoughts, annoyed that she gave a damn about where the director was. Sharp plastic scored the side of her hand, and she watched tiny droplets of blood well up in the wound.

Under the whiskey, she could taste the remnants of the copper tang from her rough assault on Jae's mouth. She couldn't call it a kiss. It hadn't been.

But you want it to be.

Yes.

Reed poured more whiskey in a fresh glass and downed it in one smooth motion, the fire skipping her mouth and igniting in her belly. The bottle beckoned her, its dark liquid and mind-numbing promise an easy solution to the turmoil raging through her mind.

That was wrong. You shouldn't have done that. But she had wanted to know, needed the proof of Jae's guilt—and had been given more than she'd bargained for. Another fifth of the potent alcohol slid easily down her throat.

A faint buzz was starting now and fuzzy warmth was spreading through her body. Reed poured another glass but didn't drink from it, content to let what she had already consumed do its job. Oblivion was a nice thought—but it also meant being out of control.

So, what now?

I could walk away. The new contract had released enough money so that, added to what 'Up Close' had paid, Rio's surgery was no longer out of reach or a hardship. The worst Jae could do would be to sue for non-performance, and by the time that came to court, the money would be long since spent.

You promised.

And you're blameless? She knew she wasn't. Awareness of her own complicity only increased the anger, there was no way to mitigate her own responses, or choices.

She fucking promised too. Promised a friendship she couldn't deliver. Had used friendship to manipulate and seduce her. And she'd wanted the friendship so badly she'd ignored the voice in her head that knew better, that knew there was always a price.

Reed rolled a mouthful of whiskey around her tongue, absorbing the alcohol, and savoured the taste. This time she wasn't going to be the one to pay it.

Jae drove without thought or direction. Halfway to Santa Monica, it occurred to her that she couldn't remember any traffic lights—never mind if she had stopped at the red ones. The metallic copper taste of blood lingered in her mouth, a tangible link to her guilt.

What do I do now? How do I salvage a working relationship out of this? Will Reed's promise hold? Or will I walk onto the set tomorrow morning only to find I have lost more than my best friend.

And there was another thing to consider. It would, if Reed walked off the set, most likely cost Jae her career. The one slim hope she had was that Riordan would hold Reed to the contract. *But you released the restrictive clauses on the Balance contract, and she signed it yesterday.*

"Rule number one, Cait: Never ever mix business and pleasure. And I blew it." She hadn't even let Becky read for walk-on parts in the movie. *You blew more than that, m'grrl.*

"What'll I do if she walks out?" Jae turned a corner and parked the car in an empty slot along the shoreline. The wind had picked up with the setting sun and a stiff breeze blew in from the Pacific. Rose-coloured rays danced along the undulating waves, giving the ocean a fantasy appeal.

"What do I do if she doesn't?" Oy. That was harder. If Reed walked off, that was it—it was over and done with. But if she came back. *If she comes back, I have to find a way to work with her.*

If you can find a way to work with her, m'grrl, then maybe.... Jae cut the errant thought off and opened the trunk to remove the blanket. A black briefcase style tote looked back up at her. *Reed's laptop, and her purse, and the hat.* She didn't know why, but she lifted the hat out of the trunk and ran her thumb along the edges of the brim before putting it on.

It was miles too big. And it fit just right.

Jae wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, the rough nap of the Mexican weave comforting against her bare arms, and walked toward the pounding surf. Maybe the noise of the ocean would drown the voice in her head that would not let her forget her guilt.

TWENTY-EIGHT

No Range Rover.

Jae hadn't realized how badly she wanted to see Reed until she saw the vacant slot, the oil-marred blacktop accusatory in its emptiness. *She could just be running late.*

The blonde took Reed's laptop and backpack out of the front foot well and slung the straps of both over her right shoulder before adding her own bag to the left one. The coffee was a challenge, but cautious navigation enabled her to squeeze through the front doors without dropping anything.

Her office seemed stark without Cait's computer and assorted knickknacks adding to her own clutter, and Jae wished that Cait hadn't moved into Roan's old office. The director set the cardboard take-out tray down on the unoccupied desk, along with Reed's things. She'd figure out how to get them back to the actress later.

It was still pretty early, and most of the crew wouldn't be around yet, so Jae dug out the edit notes that the film editor had forwarded on Friday. Thankfully, it was material from the second unit and the close-up shots of Irish character actress, Killian Downey. The actress cast as Kerry's best friend had successfully captured the wry, humour of her character, Colleen, and had excellent chemistry with Gwen. Filming tomorrow would switch to the first unit material for those scenes and would pick up any deficiencies or gaps in the second unit's coverage. Not that she expected any. This morning, they would shoot the preliminary "villain" scenes, and if she survived that, there was still a memorial service to get through before she could go home.

It was hard, but she resisted the urge to look out the large window behind the desk every five minutes to see if the Range Rover was there. At six a.m., Jae couldn't hold off any longer. Reed had been due in make-up at five-thirty, so even if she had been running late, she should have arrived by now. Or called.

"She here?" The gargoyle maintained a stony silence and refused to answer. "You're a big help." The chair swiveled and she turned to look for herself. No Reed. Somehow, she'd expected more from the actress. *Guess you don't know her as well as you thought you did.*

"Whatcha looking at?" Cait's voice broke her reverie.

"Nothing." Jae swiveled back around and faced her assistant.

"Jesus, Jae, you look like shit. What did you do—spend the night in a

dumpster?”

“The beach.”

Cait didn’t appear to have an answer for that, and Jae hoped that the subject would get dropped. Preferably over a cliff.

“I’m going to get coffee. Want one?”

Jae pointed at the other desk. “Actually it was my turn. I brought. Might have to run it through the nuker though. I forgot about it.”

“You forgot about it?”

“Don’t start, Cait, ok? Not today. Not now.” Jae knew she was held together with what her grandfather would have called a hunk of baling wire and a gob of spit—in other words—barely. Lack of sleep and a guilty conscience weren’t great weapons to take into a sensitive chat with Cait.

“Touchy. So I guess I won’t ask why there are three cups of coffee here.”

“What?”

“Coffee. Hot drink—contains caffeine. There are three here.” Cait’s brow was raised slightly, full lips quirked in an inquiring grin.

Three. It was her morning for coffee. Had she ordered three coffees? *I must have. Here they are.* Jae picked up one of the cups and read the side. It was a misto. *So, no accident, then.* “I guess, I guess I was on auto-pilot. It’s Reed’s.”

“You might not want to heat hers up—just in case she throws it back at you.”

“Cait....” She trailed off, not wanting to start a conflict with her assistant on top of everything else.

“I’m sorry Jae. This one is different, huh?”

“Yeah. It is. I blew it, Cait. And a friendship is not all I may have blown.”

“You have to separate them, Jae. If Reed walks out on the picture just because she found out you’re gay—that’s her problem, not yours. At work, your sexual orientation is irrelevant. You keep telling me that she’s not aloof—just professional. Well if she’s so bloody professional, then she’ll be here. She may hate your guts on a personal level, but she’ll be here. Or were you wrong about her all along?”

What on earth is up with Cait this morning? Her friend was direct and honest with Jae in ways that no one else dared to be, but this bordered on antagonistic, even for her. The blonde took a deep breath and reined in her temper. “Maybe,” was all she said in response. She grabbed her clipboard from the desk. “I’m due on the set.”

You were wrong about Roan. Maybe you were wrong about Reed, too. So, what to do? In a way, Cait was right. It was business. So if Reed didn't show, then she'd do what she had to do from a business standpoint. That decided, Jae turned and went back into her office.

"Hey, pal." She lifted the gargoyle slightly and slipped a blank piece of paper out from under him, then dug in her drawer for a pen.

Reed,

I can't think of what to say right now. There really isn't anything to say except, I'm sorry you had to find out that way. That doesn't seem to be enough. But I am.

Jae

Jae chewed the tip of the pen as she read over the words. One hand slipped into her hair and she twisted the blonde locks around her fingers as she tried to think of what else to say. She gave up and signed it. Folding it, something else occurred to her, and she scrawled a couple of lines across the bottom, then added her initial. It would have to do.

Your body or your talent? I would have chosen your friendship.

J

Jae took the key to Reed's trailer from her key ring and gathered up the actress' things. It took less than five minutes to get to the trailer and put the bag and laptop inside. The trailer had become sort of like the room in Orlando—a shared sanctuary from the madness of the film set—and a lump formed in her throat as she remembered the haircut. As she remembered what she had forfeited. She left the key on top of the letter, in the center of the table. Wiping away the tears before they could spill over, Jae clamped down on her emotions and left.

* * *

The door to the soundstage opened with a metallic creak, and she stepped into its air-conditioned comfort. The catering table had been moved around the set that had been constructed at the end of the soundstage in order to take advantage of the high ceiling. Jae cut through the set, which was a mock-up of the mental institution, noting as she went that preliminary cables had been laid for the upcoming

shoot.

She stepped out of an entryway and collided with the last person she'd expected to see. Blue eyes locked on hers for a moment, unfathomable in their icy distance, then the moment was gone and Reed stepped past like she didn't exist.

"Reed...."

The tall woman turned on one heel. "My talent, Jae. That's it. Nothing more." Then the actress was gone, long strides taking her across the soundstage before the director could muster a response.

* * *

The look of hurt in Jae's eyes lingered in Reed's mind as she crossed back to the area of the soundstage devoted to Kerry's apartment. The director looked like shit. There were circles under her eyes and a pallor to her skin that was at odds with the normally healthy tan she sported. It looked like Jae's night had been as rough as hers. *Not my problem.*

Right.

The bright lights hurt her eyes a little and she took another sip of the coffee, thankful that she didn't have a hangover. An assistant called for places, and Reed left her coffee on the side table and moved to her mark. She was grateful that her scenes for the next couple of days were darker than the romantic stuff they had been shooting.

Of course it made it easier that she didn't much care for the actor playing Kyle. But every piece needed a villain and if nothing else, Rafe would play Kyle as a slimeball. Sometimes you couldn't stop your natural personality from showing on camera, and Rafe Evans had made a career of playing himself.

Commands were given and the tableau came to life.

Rafe delivered his line. "Who the fuck are you?"

"A friend," Reed moved across to where Gwen stood and dropped her voice a register, "who doesn't like to see other friends being manhandled."

"I don't know who the hell you are, but this is none of your business. Got me?" He tried to drop his voice, but it didn't quite work.

Gwen burst out laughing. "Sorry. Sorry."

They retook their places and Reed waited for her cue. Reed could hear the ragged tiredness in the director's voice as the cue came. "Action."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"A friend," once again Reed moved across to where Gwen was and

projected the same edgy menace that she had before, “who doesn’t like to see other friends being manhandled.”

“I don’t know who the hell you are, but this is none of your business. Got me?”

“Cut,” Jae called. “Reed, can I get you not to drop your voice so low?”

“You want me to change the character because he can’t act?”

“No. I want you to change it because I don’t want that level of menace until later. I want Kyle underestimating Dar.”

Reed turned her back on the director and took up her place again.

“Action.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“A friend,” Reed re-approached Gwen and dropped her voice a register, “who doesn’t like to see other friends being manhandled.”

“I don’t know who the hell you are, but this is none of your business. Got me?”

“You know, my father had a name for people like you, but you probably don’t want to hear what it was.”

“Cut.”

Now what? Reed watched as Jae came over, and spoke quietly to Gwen, rotating her slightly so that more of the doorway was visible between them. Then the director turned toward her.

“Not quite so angrily. Try it more conversationally. He gets angry, you stay in control. Bait him. Okay, once more from ‘who.’” Jae’s voice was calm, undemanding and professional.

Reed swallowed her surprise. She’d expected to begin receiving the same treatment from Jae that she had gotten from Roan. Figured that Jae would stop being nice once she no longer had anything to gain.

Probably just another ploy. She needs you to keep filming or her career is toast.

Or maybe she is just doing her job, same as me.

Maybe. But don’t count on it.

The noise level on the set suddenly dropped, and Reed broke out of her reverie to see the executive producer come onto the set. Rod Chambers had a magazine clenched in his right hand, cheeks red with anger. He stopped in front of Jae and slammed the magazine down on a table. “What in the hell is this?”

Not waiting for an answer, Chambers carried on past the director until he was standing toe to toe with Reed, his dark eyes a couple of inches below hers. “What were you thinking? Assuming, of course, that you were.”

A number of responses darted through her mind, most of them geared toward allowing her temper free rein and a legitimate chance to escape the set, with its associated stress of remaining professionally detached from her emotional responses to Jae. “I was thinking we haven’t been properly introduced. And you’re standing a little too close, for someone I don’t know.”

Chambers’ face got even redder, but to his credit, he didn’t explode. *Pity*, she thought. Over his shoulder the actress could make out Jae talking on her cell, hand cupped around the receiver. Suddenly she wished her response had been more antagonistic—if she were going to get hung out to dry, better to go out swinging.

“I want to see you in my office, *now*.” He turned on a heel and made his way back across the set. Before he could leave, Jae intercepted him.

“The interview was done with my consent and participation. If you want to take someone to task, it should be me.”

Jae’s intercession surprised her again. The blonde was not behaving the way she expected, and it unnerved her more than she cared to admit. The executive producer gave the director a strange look, then jerked his head for her to follow as well. Reed ignored the reassuring smile that Jae tried to give her, and concentrated instead on the dark pinstriped suit of the executive producer. He led them to a well-appointed corner office down the hall from Jae’s and motioned for them to sit. Reed took a minute to look around, gaining information about the executive producer from the way his office was decorated.

“So, who wants to go first?” The relaxed posture was in direct contrast to the anger he had displayed on the set, and which the actress sensed was still seething under the deceptively calm surface.

“I apologize for not keeping you more closely informed, and we haven’t seen the full text of the ‘Up Close’ article yet, but basically—they were hounding Ms. Lewis, she came to me, and we solved the problem.”

“By giving a lurid interview to a rag?”

“That information was going to come out anyway. We were able to control how much digging they did and hopefully kept the worst buried.”

He looked to Reed for confirmation and she nodded her head, backing Jae up, the irony not lost on the actress.

There was a knock on the door, and Chambers yelled a terse, “Come in.”

Caitlynn Waters entered the room, loose paper sheets in one hand.

“Here’s the LA Times response article. Thom just faxed through our advance copy.”

“Thank you, Cait.” Jae turned to Chambers and handed him the article. “We then had someone close to Ms. Lewis essentially give a rebuttal interview—fleshing out and putting a different spin on the details that ‘Up Close’ used—effectively scooping them and leaving our ...” the director indicated everyone in the room, “version as the one the public remembers.”

“I see.” The executive producer steepled his hands and rested them under his chin, eyes locked on Jae. “So there’s no truth to the allegation that you are lovers? That Roan bequeathed his toy to you?”

“What?” Jae flinched, then looked over at Reed, giving her an apologetic look.

“You didn’t know? See for yourself.” He tossed the magazine over.

Jae picked it up, eyes scanning the page. “He left Blackmon Pictures to me?”

“According to their sources, yes, Blackmon and all of its assets—of which she is apparently one. Mix that with a sexual angle and it could be trouble. If you own her contract, you shouldn’t be sleeping with her. It reinforces a negative stereotype, one we are trying to break down with this picture.” He grinned wryly in recognition of how Hollywood really worked under the surface. “Not that a scandalous set romance ever hurt a picture at the box office.”

The only thing that kept Reed in her chair was the obvious shock on both Caitlynn and Jae’s faces. *Was I the only one in Hollywood who didn’t know Jae is gay? Apparently.* Chambers didn’t seem the least bit upset about the lesbian angle—just the publicity one.

“We’re just friends. It’s a business relationship,” Jae hastily amended. “And I’ll void out the personal services contract immediately. We already adjusted the picture-specific contract. We were just waiting to find out who would be left in control of Blackmon to handle the other one.”

Reed listened to them discuss the situation, and decided to remain silent, lost for the time being in thought. *So why didn’t she hang me out to dry?* She missed the remainder of the talk, only coming back into the room as Jae’s chair scraped the floor when she stood to leave. Following suit, she also stood, then filed out behind the other two women when they left the office.

“Holy shit, Jae, he left you Blackmon.” Cait shook her head incredulously.

“We don’t know that for sure. The will won’t be officially read until later—after the service. And if it’s true, the first order of business is to get rid of that contract.”

Green eyes turned her way, and for a minute Reed was tempted to smile back. Angry with herself for the thought, she snapped, “It changes nothing, Jae. Nothing.” She moved away from the director and continued on her path out of the bungalow.

TWENTY-NINE

Jae swung her legs out of the car, careful not to crease the knee length skirt or create a run in her stockings. She slipped off her sandals, trading them for a pair of beige low-heeled pumps.

A well-maintained path wound through manicured lawns, and the blonde followed it to where a small group of mourners had gathered. She took a place at the back of the group and quietly waited for the service to begin. *Trust Roan to opt for a graveside service. A showman to the last.* That Roan was being buried almost a month after he died was, in fact, due to the precise instructions he left in his will. It had taken that long for all of his relatives to be notified and to assemble everyone named in the will.

A priest in a white stole and long robe spoke a few words in Latin, then was replaced by a man who looked enough like Roan to be his twin. Jae listened with half an ear, still unsure what had made her come at all. Her feelings about Roan were decidedly mixed. The progression of speakers continued until she sensed it was her turn. Mind in turmoil she stepped forward. *How do I eulogize a man that I am beginning to despise?*

So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours, in the last week, that she still hadn't come to grips with how she felt about Roan. *Is Reed right? Am I subconsciously like him?* She knew that her motives appeared questionable, but none of her behaviour had been the result of wanting to use or manipulate Reed.

The faces of the other mourners were indistinct through the tears she was surprised to find she was shedding. *No matter what he was to you, Reed, he was still my mentor, and friend. And I don't give those up easily. No? Then why have you just accepted Reed's anger and taken all the blame?*

Jae sensed that the others were waiting so she stepped forward and touched the satiny surface of the ornate ebony chest that contained her mentor's ashes. "I knew him for years, and to my sorrow found that I didn't know him at all."

She was burying more than a mentor or a friend. In that moment, watching the sunlight glint off the polished wood, she realized that she was saying goodbye to an ideal. And that hurt.

Numb, Jae walked away from the service, unable to watch as the small chest was lowered into the ground and unaware of the curious eyes that followed her retreating form until it was out of sight.

She didn't remember the drive home and tiredly mounted the stairs to

her bedroom. The answering machine flashed its red beacon-light in urgent semaphore, but she ignored it. Bits and pieces of clothing were left in her wake until finally she reached the loft and fell gratefully onto the bed.

Today had been the sort of day she hoped never to repeat. *It's a good thing I'm blonde—or the gray hair I earned today would be showing.* She'd survived it, even though it had cut deeply to be so thoroughly rebuffed by Reed. Her note had gone unanswered, but then she hadn't really expected a few words on a piece of paper to erase the mistakes she'd spent weeks making. One hand snaked under a pillow and drew it closer, and she closed her eyes, trying to let go of the tension of the day.

Sleep was a long time coming. Her mind was awl with images. Reed's eyes, the photos, storyboards for the last two weeks of filming, Roan's grave and the turmoil of self-examination played over and over in her head, like the chorus of a song, keeping Morpheus at bay, until she finally dropped off into a fitful sleep.

* * *

A wild montage of images whirled through her dreams; snatches of accusation and Roan's mocking face overlaid intense fear. Her eyes opened, startled, and she studied the end of the bed, focusing on the emerging outline of wood. She could still hear Roan's nightmare voice, a low rumble that confirmed her worst fears.... *You're finally like me.*

The bedsheets clung to her skin, wet with perspiration. Jae sat up in the cloying heat and tried to clear the echo of her dream out of her mind and ears. *Is that what Reed goes through every night?*

She got out of bed, wrapping the blue sarong around her hips and walked out onto the small balcony that opened off of her bedroom. The night air was heavy, without the slightest hint of a breeze, and the heat felt like a weight on her shoulders. Snippets of the dream continued to play, making her reluctant to go back to bed.

It had been vivid and surreal—even for her. Peering through the open portal into her room, she looked at the clock. Three a.m. Jae moved back inside, leaving the door open behind her to air out the nervous fear she could feel in the room. Leaving the top floor, Jae went to get a guitar. It wasn't until she got downstairs that she remembered she hadn't picked up her guitars after the benefit. Which left only one option to distract her from the disquieting voice of Roan.

Jae finished wrapping her hands and made sure the velcro tabs were

securely fastened. The white tape ate what little moonlight glimmered from the smog-hazed night sky and glowed slightly in the dark.

Limber from a light stretching routine, she went to work on the bag, using the repetitive motions and pattern of kicks and punches to settle her mind. The steady whap of her hands and feet against the leather filled the night with a cadence that unwittingly brought back the words she had heard in her dream. The more garish images were fading and most of the words lingered just out of reach, only impressions remained of most of it.

I am not like you, she asserted, pounding the bag. *And I refuse to pay for your crimes.*

She hit the bag again, making it swing with the violent impact of her foot against its hardness. *I'm tired of having my actions judged against your misdeeds.* The blows were coming so fast and hard that the bag appeared to be standing still. Before it could move in one direction, another jab would change the bag's course, only to be hit again, once more altering the path. *I'm tired of feeling guilty, tired....* Jae stopped, and rested one hand on the bag to stop its motion.

That was it. *I feel guilty.* She laughed out loud and shouted at the dream messenger, "I'm not like you!" It was the guilt that separated them. The guilt that had given her a twisted musical nightmare, and the guilt that accepted Reed's anger unchallenged.

Jae had never been so glad to feel guilty in her whole life.

So what are you going to do about it?

* * *

"So what are you going to do now?"

It was a rhetorical question whose solid sound in the air anchored her reaction and gave her something to focus on other than the tears that threatened to escape. Jae had been here, silently returning her things, after she had left to go to wardrobe. On the table she could see the key resting on cream coloured paper. Reed looked at the docking station, then at her laptop.

I should take it out and return it.

Ooh that's good—cut your nose off to spite your face.

Fine, the docking station stays. She left them untouched and wandered through the small trailer.

In the bedroom, Reed gathered the clothes she had discarded earlier and stuffed them into a plastic bag. The shirt that Jae had borrowed and

slept in hung from the door knob. It smelled faintly of vanilla and sandalwood, the fragrances of both their perfumes lingering on the white cotton.

It wasn't all her fault, you know.

Reed shied away from that train of thought and collected the rest of her belongings before digging out the cell phone to call one of the wranglers for a lift to the house. It was, after all, what assistants to the assistant assistant wrangler did now that horses were a thing of the past.

A cheery youth met her at the front door of the production company's bungalow, and she noticed that Jae's Saturn was already gone. *That's odd. Jae is always here.*

She gave the boy her address and then ignored him for the rest of the trip, though she was amused by the covert appreciative looks he periodically cast in her direction. *The right look and I would have the rest of my afternoon filled. But for what? To prove I'm not gay?* She didn't need proof badly enough to have sex with some kid who barely qualified to drink publicly.

And would it really be proof? came the mental rejoinder.

They were driving against the flow of traffic, the lanes and freeways sparsely occupied as the commuters either had not begun their treks home or were headed in the opposite direction, so the drive passed relatively quickly. Reed nodded politely, uttered a cordial, "Thank you," as she got out of the vehicle and headed into the house.

She dropped the cell onto its charger as she cut through the living room to the bathroom. Reed thought about her options. *Do I stay here or go back to the hotel?* This morning it had looked like the hotel would be home for a few days. Now it seemed that Jae wasn't going to push, and they could at least work in relative equanimity.

Hot water filled the large tub and steam filled the room, the cedar paneling releasing its scent under the humidity. Reed sank into the water, its nearly scalding heat soothing her muscles and skin. Music from the Enya CD swelled and echoed nicely from the walls of the house. Jae had introduced her to the artist during one of their late night gab sessions in Orlando, and she'd hung onto the CD after they had gotten back.

Why did you have to be like him? I would have done.... What? Anything. Just because you asked. You didn't need to manipulate me.

But it had all been a lie.

Reed lost track of how long she had been soaking in the tub, only stirring as the water began to cool. Drip-drying in the LA heat, she

strolled to her bedroom and grabbed a dress from the closet. The silk hung loosely and felt good against her skin, its black sheen a perfect match for her hair.

After the various taxicabs and drivers over the last couple of days, it felt good to get behind the wheel again. The Range Rover's precision steering and powerful engine hurtled smoothly along the freeway, and she let the task of driving absorb her attention fully.

It hadn't been hard to find out where and when Roan's rescheduled memorial service was being held, and Reed pulled into the parking lot of the cemetery. The service had already started by the time she found the gravesite, and she hung back, watching but not joining the small group clustered about his headstone.

Jae's blonde hair attracted the sun, and the actress spotted her immediately. Reed wondered if the director knew how expressive her posture was, tension and anxiety were easily readable, even from a distance. To the front, a dais held a darkly gleaming box, too small to be a casket, which most likely held the cremated remains of Roan Pirsig.

He was gone and it was over. *So why are you making her pay for his mistakes?*

I'm not. She lied to me. Pure and simple. Lied to get what she wanted. End of story.

And you had nothing to do with it?

There was movement in the group, and Reed broke off her running mental argument to watch as Jae stepped forward to speak.

"I knew him for years, and to my sorrow found that I didn't know him at all." One hand had touched the chest briefly then dropped back to Jae's side.

Even from the distance of the tree she was lurking next to, Reed could tell that Jae was in pain. The lost look on the blonde's face cut deeply, and the words carried on the wind left the actress confused. She had expected Jae to wait around to claim the spoils, but her confusion grew as the director left the service before its conclusion.

Curious, Reed watched as Jae left, her own emotions a whirling mix of conflicting desires. She couldn't just turn her feelings on and off—no matter how she could make it appear—and right now she wanted.... *What, exactly?* It was a good question, and one she didn't have the answer to.

Not until the last of the mourners and crew had left the grave, did Reed venture forward, unsure of what drew her to the fresh mound. *Roan Laurent Pirsig. Too Soon Gone.* There were no specific dates, just the

years bracketing his life. *1962-1999*. It was simpler than she would have supposed, given his bold showmanship and flair for the dramatic. But then, its very simplicity stood out in the panicked opulence of this corner of a cemetery dedicated to the rich and famous, so maybe it wasn't so out of character after all.

Unexpectedly, tears began to fall and the headstone wavered through the watery haze. The ache in her throat confused her. *Why now? After all this time?* It might have been the overwhelming emotionality of the last few days, but she thought it ran deeper. She just couldn't put her finger on why she would grieve for a man she hated.

It never occurred to her that she might be grieving for the girl he had stolen or the woman she had become.

THIRTY

Jae looked up from the editing machine. The second unit director, Michael Brust was standing in the doorframe, his expression hesitant, and she felt her stomach clench slightly in anticipation.

“What’s up?” she asked with an optimism she didn’t feel. He was shooting one of the confrontations between Kyle and Dar, and given the tension that pervaded the set today, Jae didn’t hold out much hope that the news would be good.

It was a scene that, given her background in martial arts, she would normally have shot, but the actor portraying Kyle had proved to be moody and reluctant to shoot an action scene directed by a woman. It was easier to let someone else co-ordinate the blocking and rehearsals, while she concentrated on filming the pivotal conflict tomorrow.

“She’s a klutz.”

“A klutz?” Jae hadn’t expected that.

“Her leg goes up,” Michael motioned with his hands, then suddenly let them drop, simulating a fall, “and wham. She goes down.”

Oh boy. To drop the blocking would render the scene totally ineffectual. The audience had to see Kyle attacking Dar. And Reed as Dar had to make the audience believe in her strength and determination. To use body doubles and stunt performers for the whole thing would limit her shots and increase the difficulty of the edit, while reducing the material she would have to work with.

Jae had just assumed that a woman as tall and toned as Reed had some athletic background. The actress certainly moved like she was in control of her body. “That bad?”

“Unbelievable.”

Jae turned off the tape machine and stood, cracking her back as the vertebrae slid into place.

The second unit director winced in sympathy. “Ouchers.”

“I’ve been neglecting my own work-outs lately.” Which was sort of true. Jae had neglected them more than usual during the early part of filming—with first Reed, then the long days and outside schedule, distracting her from any serious conditioning work. But over the last couple of days she had used brute physicality to bring on exhausted, dreamless slumber. Her body wasn’t impressed, and aching muscles and abused joints were protesting the savage treatment. “Let’s go take a look.”

The brief antagonistic flare-ups of Sunday had settled into a cold war of sorts—a social *détente* in which lines had been drawn and sides chosen. Reed seemed oblivious to the quiet support of her co-star and others, spoke only when spoken to, and when not required to be on the set, disappeared into her trailer. Amazingly enough, the film continued to progress on schedule. In a bizarre way, it served to justify Jae's original faith in the actress. She was a professional.

Together Michael and Jae left the technical offices behind and headed for the soundstage. About halfway, Jae stopped, reached out and touched his arm, bringing him to a halt. "Other than that, how does she seem?"

Brown eyes regarded her thoughtfully, as if trying to gauge what he could and could not say. *Which, thought Jae, is hardly surprising, given my reaction last time he said something negative about her.*

"When the camera is rolling, fine. Better than fine. Otherwise...." He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?"

That fit. As far as Jae knew, Reed had only Heidi and Geoff in her circle of friends. Whatever the actress was going through—she was going it alone. Even Holly seemed to be getting the cold shoulder—the scriptwriter paying for the director's transgression the same way Jae was paying for Roan's.

Unaware of her thoughts, her companion continued. "In fact, I have to give her credit. We've been over that scene at least twenty times, and not once has she refused to try again."

Jae laughed. "Who'd have thought getting her to kick someone would be harder than getting her to kiss them."

He chuckled back, then held the studio door open for her to enter first, before responding in a pseudo-sage-like manner, "A true mystery of life."

* * *

Reed moved to the side of the stage. It was the first time all week that she hadn't left the building as soon as cut had been called. But the director of the second unit had said he'd be right back, so the actress found a quiet spot away from everyone else and sat down on a spare apple box.

Around her, she could hear the murmur of various conversations, the steady noise filling the large space. Off to one side, Holly was playing with a video camera, but kept it pointed away from Reed. Instead the

scriptwriter seemed content to shoot footage of the technical crew who were doing the real filming.

She continued to watch the activity, tucked away in her vantage point, all but hidden from the crew. Head tilted against a large wooden beam, Reed stretched her long legs out to ease the ache that had crept into the overworked muscles. The scraping of wood against concrete broke the quiet, as a couple of grips began shifting set material to her left.

“What’s up with Cavanaugh and Lewis?”

“Dunno. Honeymoon must be over.”

“Too bad. Lewis actually looked like she was developing a sense of humour.”

One of the people chuckled. “Yeah, her slipping tongue to Pooh bear was pretty fucking funny.”

“And that kiss. Wow!”

“I know. Man, what I wouldn’t give to get kissed like that by my girl.”

“Some women have all the fucking luck.”

The crewmen moved out of earshot and the rest of the conversation was lost in the growing distance and the noise of the partition they were dragging with them. The actress watched the retreating forms incredulously. *They think that we’re having a lover’s quarrel.*

Hey, look on the bright side—they didn’t call you the Amazon Ice Queen. “Some bright side,” she muttered to herself. Reed stepped out of the shadows as Jae entered the studio with Brust, both laughing over something. Jae’s smile slipped a little as she caught sight of Reed, and the director stiffly waved her over.

“Michael tells me that the staging of this scene seems to be a problem.”

“It’s not the staging. She’s a klutz.” The jibe came from offstage.

Reed shot Rafe Evans a dirty look, daring him to comment again. The actor merely leaned back in his chair, smirking, and for a second she hoped it would collapse under his obnoxious ass.

The blonde director shook her head. “There is a difference between being untrained and being a klutz. I should have checked this sooner.”

“Whatever.”

Jae ignored the comment and called places. Reed took up her stance and waited for action to be called. She was acutely aware of Jae and tried to focus on the scene instead of on the director.

“Action.”

Bending one knee, Reed leaned over slightly and thrust her leg

outwards, once again losing her balance. A twinge of pain shot through her groin, and she pursed her lips to keep from showing her discomfort.

"You're overbalancing." Jae moved closer, the awkward way she moved telegraphing hesitancy. In spite of the awkwardness, the director shifted her weight and brought one leg up at a ninety-degree angle to her body. "Keep your weight centered here." She touched her lower abdomen.

Reed studied the director's movements as Jae repeated the maneuver. The blonde was balanced and perfectly still, no tremor or strain evident in the fluid motion.

"Now you." Jae indicated she should try again.

Around them the crew was watching, and the earlier comments from two of the grips made Reed feel like every eye was focused on their interaction, the curious stares given weight by the innuendo. She put aside the discomfort and tried again. Her leg got partway up before she lost her balance and started to topple forward.

Strong hands stopped her forward progress, righting her, then quickly let go. "Sorry." Jae dropped her hands like she'd been scalded and took a backwards step. Their eyes met for a moment, and Reed nodded, then looked away quickly.

"See, a klutz." Evans spoke derisively from where he lounged in his chair. "Or maybe you need a man to handle ... action."

A titter broke across the area, the nervous laughter a signal to Reed that the power structure on the set was changing. She wondered why Jae had left the action sequences to Brust despite the involvement of a big name actor like Evans. *Did Jae realize that if she lost control to Evans, then she wouldn't get it back—her credibility would be eroded?*

What do you care?

I don't. I'm just not going to listen to that loudmouth for the next week.

"Why? Is there one here?" Reed drawled, looking around.

Jae's eyes widened in surprise, then she turned in Evans' direction. "No insults on my set. But ..." she gestured with one hand, "feel free to repeat that tone in an actual scene. It was perfect."

Reed raised her own eyebrows in surprise; snarky comments were not normally Jae's style. She took a closer look at the director, seeing the tension and exhaustion that ringed the blonde's eyes with dark circles. A tired and cranky director was the last thing she needed to work with, so Reed clamped down on her own desire to take a potshot at Jae. "Teach me."

"Teach you? But—"

Reed lowered her voice so only Jae could hear the next words. "If you don't teach me how to do this—he wins—and you lose control. So get on with it."

"I'd need to ... touch you."

She froze, meeting Jae's eyes for longer than a second or two for the first time since the revelation on Saturday. "No." Reed could feel every eye in the studio on them, and the comments she'd overheard from the grips came to mind. She was damned if she did, and damned if she didn't.

Jae nodded in understanding and backed away. "We'll sort something out."

To the side Evans sniggered, and Reed made her decision—she'd have to let Jae touch her. "I've got better things to do than wait around. Just make it quick."

"Turn around," Jae instructed, a nervous quaver resonating under the rich texture of her voice.

Reed complied, muscles tensed slightly. Jae's hands seemed to take forever to reach her hips, then the soft weight settled over the light twill shorts and the director guided the actress through the movement.

Halfway through, Jae halted the motion. "Right here. Feel it?"

She flexed her knee slightly, testing the feel of her body as it moved through the point the director had indicated. It did feel different, almost as though she was part of the floor and air at the same time. "Yes."

"Good." Jae stepped back, removing her hands from Reed's waist. "Now I want you to repeat the move, then just before you get to the balance point, extend your leg. As you extend, let your body sink into its center of gravity."

Green eyes were watching her intently and Reed did as she was told, bringing her right leg up in a kicking motion. It took a little longer this time, but she began to topple over, and once again she felt Jae's hands steady her.

"Good. Now try it again a little more slowly. I've got you."

Reed froze at the familiar words, then moved into place before Jae could see her reaction. She half closed her eyes in a mix of concentration and denial. Three little words. She had wanted them to be true. Wanted them true in a way that left her confused and at a loss. Her body sank into the remembered safety of Jae's touch, and Reed pulled away, angry at the self-betrayal.

"I can do it myself." And she did. Lashing out with one foot instinctively, trying not to see the quiet hurt in Jae's eyes. They went

through it a few more times, each run smoother than the last, until it felt to Reed like her leg was going to fall off.

Jae had retreated to the edge of the stage to watch, once more observing the physical distance that had sprung up between them over the last few days.

It was unnerving. There were no crying apologies, no denials, nothing—just a silence between them that was so loud Reed thought it would deafen her. On edge, she thrust her leg out viciously and felt the twinge of pain explode in an agonizing jolt. Reed fell to the floor, a soft grunt escaping before she could call it back.

A flurry of activity erupted around her as the studio medical team was paged and numerous people she didn't know hovered over her in a mix of morbid curiosity and genuine concern. The press of bodies made her even angrier, and she inched back slightly to get some space.

"Let her have some breathing room," Jae instructed, squatting down next to where she had fallen. "You okay?" One hand had come to rest on Reed's shoulder, eyes searching her frame for sign of injury.

"Don't touch me."

Jae pulled her hand back. "I—"

"I don't care what you were doing. I'm fine." In spite of the pain, she stood and began to make her way off the set. To exit the area, she had to pass the screenwriter, who stood, camera lowered, watching her.

"What?" Reed barked.

Holly looked at her intently. "You know. I never figured you for stupid. An occasional bitch, yes. Stupid, no."

There didn't seem to be an answer for that, and she had to get back to the trailer before she fell. Some of the pain must have flashed across her face, because Holly's expression changed and the brunette suddenly slung one arm under the actress' elbow.

Reed attempted to withdraw her arm, but was pinned in place by both pain and the surprising strength of the writer's grip. "Holly," she said warningly.

"Shut up, Reed. Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?" Holly began to steer them towards an exit, unobtrusively supporting Reed's weight.

Stunned, she laughed, then shook her head. "No. I have been told many things, but that's not one of them." Capitulating, she allowed Holly to help her off the set, and towards the trailer. "You're not hauling me out here for a sensitive chat are you?"

"Why? Just because you're acting like a total idiot doesn't mean I'm

going to say anything about it.”

“Good.”

They had reached the trailer, and Holly took the keys from her hand and unlocked the door. The pain in her leg was making it difficult to stand, so she slumped onto the settee, gingerly extending the limb.

“Hurts, huh?”

“Yes,” the actress admitted.

“Any particular reason you opted to tough it out rather than let Jae get you medical attention?”

“Must be a part of me being stupid.”

“Ah. I actually thought it was part of the Ice Queen thing. Now the potshots at Jae—those I thought were stupidity.”

Reed regarded the tall brunette thoughtfully. She’d been avoiding Holly, the screenwriter a vivid reminder of the implosion of her relationship with Jae. Only Holly wasn’t creeping her out. Her reactions to the other woman were the same as they had always been. A bit weird, true—but the same nevertheless. “Siddown. You’re making me nervous, hovering.”

Holly sat on the lone chair, giving Reed space. “You sure you want to be alone in here with me? Folks might get the wrong idea.”

Reed snorted softly, lifting a brow sardonically. “I’ve already been tarred by that brush.”

There was a soft knock at the door and Reed stiffened, her heart rate increasing. It would be just like Jae to follow her. Then the absurdity of the thought washed away the adrenaline. *Jae won’t follow me. Not now.*

“You going to answer that?” Holly looked at her quizzically.

“Could you?” She pointed at her leg. The muscles were already tightening and Reed wasn’t entirely sure she could stand up.

“No problem. I need to get going anyway. And Reed, don’t be stupid. Get that looked at, huh?”

“Later.”

“Unh hunh.” The screenwriter shook her head, curls moving from side to side. “At least take some Advil then.”

“Deal. Who is it?”

Holly peered through a lacy curtain. “Cait Waters.”

* * *

Cait was surprised when Holly opened the trailer door. “Reed here?”

“Yeah.”

She let Holly move past, then mounted the steps and paused at the door. Reed was lounging on the short sofa, the air thick with tension, and Cait wondered what Holly and the actress had been discussing.

"Come in. I won't bite."

"No. Punching is more your style, I gather."

"That what she told you?"

"No, she hasn't really told me much at all. The busted lip sort of spoke for itself."

"What do you want?"

"Jae asked me to bring this over." She extended a hand with the voided contract, and dropped it on the table in front of the actress when Reed made no move to take it. "I need you to sign pages ten and twelve and initial where I've put tabs."

"Too chicken to face me herself?"

Cait leaned in slightly, anger colouring her tones. "I have no idea what she saw in you, and frankly I'm glad you turned out to be such a shallow bitch."

"She fucking you?" Reed drawled.

That did it. Cait had had enough. If the two of them were going to behave like children, then she would treat them that way. Between Jae's angst-filled guilt trip and Reed's petulant brooding, it was starting to feel like a soap opera. "No. I had my chance. But Jae has ethics. Not that that's a concept you would understand."

"Some ethics. She used me."

"Really?" Cait purred. "Seemed like a two-way street to me. Or do you really believe it was all her? Tell me, did Jae ever do anything you didn't want?"

Though the blue eyes darkened dangerously, the actress didn't respond.

"I didn't think so. She's funny that way." Caitlynn didn't wait for Reed to throw her out. She pushed the contract across the table and left, letting the door slam behind her.

"Ouch. That was harsh." Holly was standing against a tree, eavesdropping. Together, they headed back toward the set.

"Desperate times require desperate measures."

"She really hit Jae?"

Cait considered the question and the director's original response to it. Reed hadn't denied it, but instinct told her that whatever had led to Jae's busted lip, it wasn't something as simple as a punch. "No."

"Think they'll sort it out?" Holly asked.

“Miss Guilt and Ms. In-the-Closet? Who knows? They’d have to talk first, and I don’t see that happening any time soon.”

“I know. I want to walk up to Reed and say, ‘I have two words for you—latent homosexuality.’”

“Oh Gods. I’d pay to see her face. You see it too?” Cait started to laugh.

“Let’s just say I PING the two of them and get 100% response.”

Cait stopped laughing and grew serious. “I’ve known Jae a long time, and I’ve never seen her respond to anyone the way she does to Reed. And it’s not all sexual.”

Holly nodded. “No, it’s not. And I think that’s what would really suck, if they lost the friendship. Connections like that are hard to come by.”

They had reached the office bungalow and Holly stopped, half turned toward the parking lot. “Later. Oh, and Cait, I think Reed’s hurt a lot worse then she let on. Might want to have someone check on her later.”

“Sure,” she acknowledged the remark, slightly confused. The actress had seemed fine. A little pale, but Cait had chalked it up to fatigue and a long day combined with the residue of the verbal sparring match they had engaged in. She absently lost the train of thought, distracted by movement up ahead.

A tall thin woman with electric blue hair was just leaving the building, and an enigmatic smile graced the fine features. Cait watched Becky leave and shook her head.

“Now there goes trouble. Wonder what she wanted?”

* * *

Jae sat slumped on the couch, one foot tucked under her body, eyes fixed on the tapestry that hung on the opposite wall. The threads chased each other around the large fabric, providing a visual distraction as she tried to follow the weave.

For a brief moment today, things had felt almost normal between the two of them again, the tension swept aside in the need to do a job. Then it had all come apart, the icy mask returning to Reed’s features.

“You look awful.”

Jae jumped, startled. “That’s rich, coming from someone with blue hair. What do you want Becky?”

“I came to see how you were doing,” was the simple response. Becky folded her lithe form onto the opposite end of the couch. “And to talk.”

“Talk?” She looked over at her ex.

“Yeah, you know—that thing we used to be able to do.”

“Talk?” Jae repeated. “What do you really want?” Jae looked at Becky, waiting for the woman to get to the point.

“A part.” Becky sat down across from her. “And I need to talk to you.”

Jae considered. There had been no part while they were lovers, but now? “See Cait, she’ll get you some walk on work.”

“Thanks.” Sinuous in her movements, Becky tucked one foot under her body and rested her chin on a raised knee. “I need to ask you something.”

Wary, she unconsciously crossed her arms over her chest. “What?”

“It wasn’t because of her, was it?”

There was a plaintive quality to the question, and for the first time since they’d broken up, Jae got a glimpse of what the sudden ending of their relationship had seemed like to Becky. “No. I promise.”

Becky nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She paused and regarded her ex-lover thoughtfully. “This is going to sound really lame, but it wasn’t you.”

“It does sound lame. But it helps. A little.” Two fingers were held a fraction of an inch apart. “Bout this much.” But the amused grin belied any malicious intent behind the words. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

It wasn’t an angry accusation or even a jibe, and Jae leaned her head back against the fabric covering of the couch, while she decided how to answer. “I don’t know.”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t.” Becky spoke quietly. “I was really angry when I saw the two of you Saturday. Actually, I was pretty pissed for a couple of days.” She smiled and shrugged.

For an instant, seeing the impish grin, Jae was reminded of some of the good times they had shared, and she smiled back. “I bet. So what changed?” she asked, curious. Becky had never been predictable and this conversation was no exception.

Becky shrugged. “I can’t have you. I don’t think anyone ever has. But she does. Can I give you a piece of advice?”

“Can I stop you?” The banter was without rancour, following a joking form that they had established long ago.

“No.” Becky reached across the gulf that had sprung up between the two of them, bridging it with a light touch and a gentle look. “Fight for her.”

“It’s not that simple, Becky.”

“Yes it is. For once in your life, Jae, don’t run from what someone makes you feel.” The actress’ fingers trailed over the side of Jae’s cheek,

cupping her jaw momentarily before disengaging. Then Becky stood and left the room, leaving Jae both dumbfounded and bemused.

Fight for her? Question was—fight for what? Was there anything between them to fight for? Yes. Friendship. How?

Jae stood and paced around the room. She'd never chased a woman in her life, and wasn't particularly sure how to go about it. Deep in concentration, she didn't hear Caitlynn knock at the door.

"Hey."

She jumped again, yelling out in surprise. "Aghhh!"

"Wow. I didn't know humans could hit that range," Cait teased, ducking the swat Jae leveled in her direction.

"Whap."

Cait grew serious for a second, nodding toward the door. "Was that...?"

"Becky. Yes."

"What did she want?"

"A job. I told her that you'll set her up with some walk on stuff." Jae canted her head slightly, eyes narrowed mischievously. "She thinks I should fight for Reed."

Cait's eyes widened in surprise. "No shit?"

"Nope." Jae returned to the couch, and spread her arms wide. "Got any ideas?"

"Now that's a switch. What happened to the 'I'm not worthy' guilty routine?"

Jae ran a hand through her hair, a gesture that made her seem both vulnerable and cute. "I'm not Roan, and if I'm going to be punished, it's going to be for something I did."

Cait held the palm of her hand against Jae's forehead. "You don't feel feverish."

"Ha ha."

Jae stood patiently while Cait felt around her skull. "No bumps," she declared.

"Are you quite finished?"

"Yep." Cait grinned cheekily and flopped onto the couch. "So tell me more. How exactly do you plan to woo the Ice Queen?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"It's definitely going to take more than chocolates and flowers. You could try the Romeo and Juliet thing."

"What? Double suicide?"

"I was thinking poetry and music."

“Music?”

“They do say that music soothes the savage breast. Maybe you can sing your way out of your little rift.”

“I’m good, Cait, but not that good.” They had curled up on the couch. It felt good to sit and talk to Cait. Things had been unusually tense between the two of them over the last couple of days, and Jae had missed their easy working relationship.

“Yeah. You’re right. No one is that good.”

They fell silent, just sitting quietly while they mulled over the idea. It was nearly dark outside, and Jae watched the shadows in the room lengthen, while dust motes danced in the last of the day’s light. It was one of her favorite pastimes. The patterns created by the sparkling sunlight and the bobbing dust were always different, a reminder that even in everyday things there was always something new. She broke off her self-indulgent eye-play and rolled her head to the side, looking at her assistant. “What’s up with you?”

“Hunh?” Cait answered, startled.

“Last couple of days you haven’t seemed yourself. Everything okay?” Jae felt guilty. She’d been so absorbed in the stuff with Reed and the movie that she hadn’t really taken the time to check in with Cait.

“Nothing a week off wouldn’t cure. Planning a wedding while filming is a bitch. Remind me again how much prestige there is in being the AD on a major film.”

“There’s lots and lots of prestige to being the AD on a major film,” Jae repeated deadpan.

“That’s what I thought.” Cait paused. “Fancy a drink and some dinner?”

Jae mulled over the offer, deciding that a low-key evening might be just what the doctor ordered. “Sushi?” she asked hopefully.

“Only if you promise not to order those vile flying fish egg things.”

“I never order them—they just come on the plate. Besides, they add colour.”

“Reed like sushi?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ah, well there’s a starting point. All battle plans need starting points.”

Jae had the funny feeling that having Cait *help* her with Reed might not, in fact, be as good an idea in practice as it had seemed in theory. “Umm, Cait, about the Reed thing. Let’s just drop it okay?”

“Sure,” Cait agreed amiably. “But I can still start a betting pool,

right?”

The director groaned and flipped off the light, locking the office door behind them.

THIRTY-ONE

Reed sat, stunned, as the door swung shut. The loud click acted as an emphasis to Cait's parting words. *Did Jae ever once do anything that you didn't want?*

There it was—stark and undeniable truth. Whatever had been developing between them, she had been a willing participant. *Okay. Now what?*

The pain in her leg made it difficult for her to sit the way she was, so Reed cautiously stood and limped to the counter, rummaging in an overhead cupboard for the painkillers she knew were there. A deep swig of water from the tap washed the uncoated tablets down, and a second swallow erased the residual bitterness from her mouth and throat.

Gingerly resting her weight on the couch, she drew the leg upwards, supporting it with one hand, then let it drop softly onto the padded cushion. The settee was too short for her to recline full length, and her foot hung off the end, allowing her to let one shoe drop onto the floor with an audible thud. Still mulling, Reed leaned forward and removed the other shoe, sending it to join its partner with a negligent flick of her wrist.

"Now what, indeed?" Reed closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the overstuffed pillows. "Thirty fucking years old is a little late to be re-examining my life choices." She'd just have to do this the rational way. *Given—I'm straight. Given—Jae is not.* She snorted. *If this were a math class, I'd be flunking, 'cause those two givens didn't add up and she knew it.*

Alrighty then, plan B. Why exactly am I mad at Jae and not at Holly? They're both dykes.

Yeah? But you don't have feelings for Holly.

On second thought, let's skip that one for now.

Chicken.

I'm not gay, goddamn it. I refuse to be like that.

That? Holly's not like 'that.'

That thought froze her in place, then her mind provided a counter-argument. *Holly might not be like that, but Jae is a carbon copy of Roan.* Into safe territory again, Reed let her anger at the director brew, fanning the feeling in an attempt to distract herself from the suddenly sharp memories of adolescence. Memories that had been dredged to the surface by the interviews and the vicious turn her nightmares had taken

of late.

The issue wasn't that Jae was gay. It was being lied to, having been used and betrayed by the one person she had let inside. Now it was just a matter of time before those secrets were used against her.

By a friend.

Reed smiled ferally. Two could play at that game. She had weapons of her own. *No. You're not that person anymore.* She slumped forward, one hand coming to rest on her forehead. The voice was right. Not since Riordan had been born. But if Jae dared to try and use her son as leverage, the director would find out just how close to the surface that part of her still lurked.

Oooh, now that's not too melodramatic, is it? her inner voice taunted, ruining a pretty good pity party. *The only problem with that entire line of reasoning is that none of it seems to be your fault.*

You can't have it both ways. Either you're mad 'cause she's gay and didn't tell you, or you're mad 'cause she betrayed you. Except, where's the betrayal? It's one big fucking circular argument, babe. Now deal.

Own your part in it. There was no manipulation because there was nothing to manipulate. She called you on everything.

What about the computer station and the money?

What about them? Did she ask for anything back? Did you ever feel like she wanted more from you than you were giving her?

She kissed me. Orchestrated that whole practice scene.

Wrong!

As far as Reed was concerned, only idiots lied to themselves. The only person in the world it didn't pay to hide the truth from was yourself. You could lie to everyone else, but there was no profit in self-delusion.

All three kisses had been at her instigation—even the studio one. Jae had clearly not wanted to kiss her. And the last one, the last one was all her fault, not Jae's.

"She should have told me."

Why? her mind persisted, stubbornly. *Would it have been different? You wouldn't have kissed her if you'd known she was gay? Kissing straight chicks is cool, but not dykes?*

Exactly, she answered herself.

Ah. So that's why you kissed her after you found out she was gay. Makes perfect sense to me.

That was different.

Yeah, it was. It was mean and it hurt her. Big difference from how she treated you. That hurt, and that was the problem with thinking. Doing

was easier, except this really wasn't a doing sort of problem. But thinking—thinking left her more confused than when she'd started—and feeling like an asshole to boot.

There were too many thoughts rampaging around in her brain, too many threads to untangle in order to discover why she felt so angry and yet still wanted to find a reason for it all to disappear. To be able to walk up to Jae and smile, and know that there would be an answering one. For a brief moment on the set today, she'd felt it, felt their connection and almost let herself forget that she was angry with Jae. Forget that she had been lied to.

Did she lie? Or did she just not tell you something?

Did it make a difference?

Yes. And it became very clear to Reed just exactly what her part in all of this was. She was no closer to figuring out what to do about it, but she knew what she had to own as her fault.

What would you have done if she'd told you sooner?

The answer left her feeling cold. *Didn't exactly make a secret of how you felt about 'people like that,' did you?*

Irate, she heaved herself up, wincing as her stiffened muscles protested the sudden change in position. One hand lanced sideways, taking a firm grip on the tabletop, the steady surface bracing her against the possibility that her leg would give way under the strain. The painkillers must have done their job, because it hurt less than she expected, though more than she would have liked. "Can't have everything, I guess."

She leaned against the tabletop for a minute, eyes drawn to the thick contract and the amended codicils that freed her from bondage to Roan's film company, then slid to the right as cream coloured paper framed the silver of her spare trailer key. Tentative fingers trailed over the thick paper, brushing its folded edges but not making any attempt to pick it up.

Touching it, a small smile played about it her lips. It was so absurdly Jae—handmade paper in a day and age of instant messages and digital communication. The fibres under her fingers contrasted with the cold hardness of the tabletop and, somehow, the key was ringing on the white surface, the note now in her hand.

Reed studied the paper as it opened of its own volition. Bold pen strokes resolved into words, and she read the simple missive.

Reed,

I can't think of what to say right now. There really isn't anything to say except, I'm sorry you had to find out that way. That doesn't seem to be enough. But I am.

Jae

Your body or your talent? I would have chosen your friendship.

J

She read the words over again, digesting the syllables. Not an apology for what Jae was, but for what she hadn't said. And that had been four days ago. Reed dropped back onto the sofa, the pain in her leg temporarily forgotten as the implication of the note hit home.

Nothing had changed. She'd not even read the note, and yet Jae had continued to treat her professionally, exactly the same as before. *Why?* That's what she couldn't fathom, and there was only one person who could provide the answers: Jae.

You owe her that much.

Reed was torn between what she wanted to do, what she knew she should do, and the certain knowledge that doing it would mean facing truths that she'd spent half a lifetime hiding from.

The trailer suddenly seemed too small, its narrow confines no longer comfortable, the space too tiny for her and the memories it held. Brusquely she gathered up her bag, then as an afterthought she tucked the linen paper into one pocket. The voided personal services contract she left on the table. Full dark had fallen, and she slipped out into the moonless night.

Metal gleamed dully under the lot lights, the Saturn still in its slot. Before she could think about it, Reed ducked in towards the bungalow that housed Jae's office. In her ears the sound of rushing blood drowned out the screaming voice that demanded she leave, her heart rate responding to the fear-inspired adrenaline. Locked. The actress dropped her hand away from the door handle—letting it pause briefly in mid-air as she considered pushing the buzzer. Disappointed and relieved, she turned back to her car, pulse still elevated.

The keys nearly fell from nerveless fingers as she struggled into the high footwells and seats of the Rover. Seated, the pain faded somewhat and she began the drive home, windows and sunroof open to let the air rush through. In its wailing, rushing flight around the leather interior, the wind made thinking impossible, and briefly she was tempted to just drive, but the quietly insistent twinge in her thigh every time she

depressed the brake ruled out the possibility. Instead she steered the car toward the dark heights of the Hollywood hills and the rented house, not bothering to tuck it into the garage.

"Fuck," Reed swore softly into the night air, letting the expletive take with it a groan of pain as she forced her leg to support her weight during the climb up the concrete stairs that led to the house. It had been relatively easy to manipulate the clutch, brake and gas pedal, but getting out of the Rover had proven to be tougher than anticipated, and now it throbbed as badly as her arm had when she'd broken it falling off the barn roof when she was fourteen.

The memory of that last summer at home cut into the images of the orphanage, replacing them with the burnished gold of fall on their island home, and Reed smiled to herself, recalling her mother's angry, worried, relieved countenance, as the woman had looked down, hands on hips. "Were you expecting to sprout wings?"

"No, but it sure would have been nice," had come her quick reply, and her mother had leaned down and picked Reed up, cradling the smaller form, careful not to jostle the arm which was canted unnaturally to one side.

"C'mon then, love. We'd best be getting you to Doctor Kelly's."

She didn't remember the trip, having passed out somewhere between the barn and the car, but it was the safest she had felt in her whole life, nestled there against her mother, knowing that Rowena Lewis would find a way to make the hurt go away. "I've got you, baby. Mummy's got you."

The words echoed through time to similar ones heard recently and shunted her mind to another moment, and a wild race down an amusement park ride. To a time when she had experienced the same sense of safety and strength beyond measure, in a place she'd least expected to find it.

And with that thought came a returning flood of memory, this time of things less pleasant. That was the pitfall of letting herself remember her mother or her grandmother: remembering time with them led to remembering time without them—and that led to places and things she didn't want to remember.

Things she could never forget.

Sleep would not come tonight, of that she was sure, so Reed stumbled out onto the deck, glad to be out of the dark house with its cloying walls. Falling into the lounge chair, she tried in vain to make out the pattern of stars overhead, the brightness that she knew had to be in the

sky swallowed by the false light of the city.

“So much for making the movie, collecting the paycheck and getting out of Dodge.” It occurred to her, and not for the first time, that her life would be so much simpler right now if Roan had had the decency to wait before getting himself killed.

Roan. Now there were memories to leave buried. Green eyes flashed through her mind, and once again her thoughts came back to Jae. All roads didn’t lead to Rome—tonight they all led to a petite, blonde director.

THIRTY-TWO

“So the big purple dinosaur ate the buff coloured horse while the alien invaders cheered wildly.”

Jae knew she was having trouble following the thread of the conversation, but couldn't figure out how the subject had twisted so grotesquely. “What?”

“Ah, so you are awake.” Cait reached across and snagged a slice of tamago from the platter, the delicate yellow egg nearly breaking in half under the pressure from the chopsticks.

“Sorry. I was just thinking.”

“About? Or is it too obvious for words?”

Grinning wryly, Jae expertly placed a slice of ginger on top of a slice of redfish and dipped it into the wasabi and soya mixture before popping it into her mouth. Finished chewing, she replied, “Actually, I was thinking about Becky.”

Cait nodded, mouth full of salmon nigiri, eyes signaling that she was listening.

Warm sake trickled down Jae's throat, and she moved her shoulders in an offhanded shrug. “She said something I can't stop thinking about.”

“Going to share?”

“She said, ‘For once in your life, Jae, don't run from what someone makes you feel.’”

“Guess she hasn't bleached away all her brain cells. She's a smart woman, Jae.”

“Yeah, she is. So tell me why I couldn't make it work with someone that smart, who obviously cares?”

“You don't really need me to answer that. You know. But I'll give you a hint. I wouldn't date you—you're a lousy girlfriend.”

“I love you, too.”

Cait laughed. “Maybe that's her angle. She gets you to chase Reed—who obviously doesn't want you, thereby getting her revenge. Or, you do get Reed, and Reed has to put up with you, and she still gets her revenge.”

“Cait, that is so twisted.” Jae was laughing so hard that the tuna nigiri balanced in her chopsticks escaped into the soya sauce pond with a small splash.

“Never, ever, underestimate a woman scorned,” Cait pronounced solemnly. “Remember Sonya?”

“Ah, but Sonya was your ex, not mine.”

“True.” Cait looked pensive. “Hmm, how come if you’re such a sucky girlfriend, that none of your exes ever spray painted your car, or pitched a fit on live campus radio?”

“Just lucky, I guess.” Another unfortunate prawn was given a ginger overcoat and dunked into wasabi and soya sauce before meeting its fate.

“Jae ...” her friend paused, waiting for Jae to meet her eyes, “Becky’s right, you know. You need to stop running eventually. Just—”

“Just what?”

“Just, I’m not sure that Reed Lewis is the person you should be trying that with. That chick’s got issues you could drive a Harvester through. You know—rule three—no sucking chest wounds of emotional need. In fact, that woman violates every rule.”

“Not true. Rule number two is still okay. Oh, and rule six.” The dating rules were long established and mostly common sense, a legacy from a mutual friend, Gryph. It was rule one that had kept her from going to bed with Cait.

“All right, I’ll give you that. She’s not a whack job. Barely. I wouldn’t be too sure about rule six.”

That was a surprise. Jae kept her eyes lowered and tried to reply casually. “You think she’s so far in the closet she’s paneling?”

“Something like that.”

Jae kept her tone light, masking her inner reaction. “That takes care of rule four then.”

As intended, Cait laughed, and together they recited Gryphon’s dating rule number four. “No sexuality experiments. You are not a lab rat.”

Inwardly tense, Jae chased a piece of kani around the tray, finding it as hard to catch mounted on rice as live crabs were on the beach. She tried to marshal her thoughts, her mind on a question she’d asked herself on a windswept beach in Miami. *It would be wrong. And it would make me like Roan.* A small porcelain cup held a serving of sake, and she tossed the clear liquid down her throat. *No ulterior motives, no hidden agendas. Just me.* It wasn’t something she could explain to Cait though, not without revealing secrets that weren’t hers to tell.

“I’ve kinda been thinking about that too.” And she had. Reed Lewis had occupied the majority of her waking thoughts and most of her sleeping ones of late. “Forget what I said about wooing Reed.” She kept her real reasons to herself and just shrugged. “Rule number one.” No dating people you worked with. Ever.

Jae took another deep swallow of the brazier warmed sake, the warm

rice alcohol lighting a matching fire in her belly. She looked up into Cait's eyes. "Friendship's as far as it goes."

"Some friend. Look, I have decidedly mixed feelings about her. On the one hand, I can see that there is something between you that makes me want to shake you both and scream 'Wake-up!'" Voice intense and low, Cait leaned forward over the table. "And on the other hand, I don't want my best friend even being 'just friends' with a woman who would give her a bloody lip."

"Cait, it wasn't like that."

"Wasn't like what? Then tell me, how'd you bust your lip?"

Jae looked down at the table, shifting her feet beneath it, glad of the walls that at least prevented anyone from seeing her face, even if they didn't do much for masking the words. "She kissed me."

"Kissed you?"

"Yes." The word was so quiet it was nearly a whisper.

Cait went quiet for a minute. "You know, she wouldn't tell me. Just accepted my accusation."

"You didn't? Please tell me you didn't pick a fight with her. All you had to do was drop off a contract. Cait!"

"Don't 'Cait' me. She asked for it."

"It was none of your business."

"I'm your friend, Jae. It is my business."

"You're also the Assistant Director. You were there to do a job, not start a fight."

"Who says I started it?"

Jae leveled her gaze at the other woman, holding her friend's hazel eyes until Cait lowered them guiltily.

"Okay, so technically I started it."

That made sense to Jae. Nothing in Reed's behaviour over the last few days gave any indication that the actress was going to start anything or even mention the specifics of what had transpired between them. Of course, she didn't put it past Reed to escalate things. There had been plenty of evidence of that behaviour.

"Yeah, well trust me, she gives as good as she gets," Cait muttered.

Jae resisted the impulse to grin. That would have been something to see. *In this corner, five foot five and weighing in at one hundred and twenty-five pounds, Caitlynn "You can suck my dick" Waters. And in the blue corner, standing five feet, eleven and a half inches, weighing in at one hundred and forty-five pounds, Reed "The Ice Queen" Lewis. Let's get reeeaadyyy to rumble.* "You didn't tell her to suck your dick or anything,

did you?" Cait's colourful expressions of exasperation were legendary.

"It's cock, Jae, and no, I didn't."

A geisha girl had brought in the next serving of sashimi and sushi, and Jae watched, amused, as the girl tried not to show her surprise at Caitlynn's choice of words.

"Good. I think you're selling her short."

"I think you put too much faith in a mercurial actress who does not have the best reputation for reliability."

This tray had a slightly different selection than the last one, and Jae fished a slice of octopus out of the assortment. Topping it with more ginger and wasabi, she chewed contentedly on the ham-like meat. The alcohol was beginning to take effect, and she leaned back against the cushioned riser. "She did an awesome job today. Though I'm beginning to think that there is bad blood between her and Evans." As she remembered the way Reed had handled the actor, a slow smile spread over her face.

Cait snorted. "There's bad blood between Evans and everyone."

"Hmmm ... well anyway, she didn't let it stop her from nailing the fight scene, in spite of having to learn the kicks in front of him."

"Kicks?" Cait asked, a worried expression on her face.

"What?" Worried in turn, she waited for the other woman to continue.

"Holly said something about Reed being hurt worse than she let on, and that someone should check on her later. I was kind of confused, and then I guess it just slipped my mind. I didn't know she meant physically."

"Slipped your mind? Someone tells you that the lead actress might be injured and it slips your mind? Honestly, Cait," Jae snapped angrily, more at herself for not pressing the issue with Reed earlier, than at Cait, then stopped, a look of horror spreading over her mouth and eyes. "I can't believe I just said that."

The AD looked up, somewhat chagrined. "For what it's worth, it was a pretty good imitation of your mother."

Jae just grunted, not wanting to appear too concerned. *Oh come on, Jae m'grrl, this is the perfect excuse to talk to her.* The colourful and carefully arranged food no longer looked appealing as she wondered how badly Reed had hurt herself.

They sat for a bit, and finally Cait spoke. "This could be a long shot, but I'm guessing dinner is over."

"Hmm. Yeah. Sorry. Do you mind?"

"No. All we had left were those flying fish thingies anyhow."

Jae stood, shrugging into her sweater, then reaching for her shoes. "Thanks, Cait."

"You're going over there, aren't you?"

"Where?" she asked, trying to look genuinely ingenuous, not wanting to admit that she did indeed harbour intentions of checking on Reed.

"Uh huh, that's what I thought. She is an adult, you know, perfectly capable of seeking medical attention all by her lonesome."

"Maybe," Jae allowed, "but it's a work related injury and that makes it my responsibility." *Oh good one.* "Can you drop me at the studio so I can get my car?"

"No. We've both had enough to drink that it's cabs, not cars."

Jae nodded acceptance, then smiled inside. Caitlynn Crusade number two—drunk driving. They had, over dinner, managed to touch on two of Cait's personal crusades. Domestic violence and drunk drivers. "All right, how about we share a cab and I drop you on the way?" They had to go by Studio City to get to the Hollywood Hills from where they were.

It wasn't until after they had dropped Cait off that Jae realized Reed might not even be home. Now what? If she called, then Reed would have a chance to hide. *Heh, if she can do that, then you'll know her leg is fine.* And if she just showed up, then Reed could still be at the studio—especially if she were too hurt to drive home.

She ran out of thinking time as the car rounded a bend, the sweep of headlights revealing that the Range Rover was parked in the drive. *She's home.*

The concrete steps were cool under her thighs as Jae sat silently contemplating what to do next. *Knock or call? How about option number three—just go home?* Calling sort of negated the point of just showing up. Not that she'd been thinking ahead when she decided to come. *I could have called from anywhere.* Except phoning left Reed an out. "Too bad I don't have an out." She considered whether she really wanted to risk being rejected, having her peace overture ignored.

Around her, Jae could hear an assortment of people, animals and things. The seemingly disparate noises blended in a concert of life, and she lost herself momentarily, drinking in the sounds. A car backfired, a dog barked counterpoint and a splash of water from a nearby pool punctuated the natural verse.

Her cell phone felt heavy in her hand, the buttons illuminated, waiting to be pressed. The smooth wooden door beckoned invitingly, the soft glow of the street lamp glinting from the ornate knocker.

Without realizing she had chosen, Jae felt the cell phone come to life in her hands. Three rings and then it was picked up.

“Lewis.”

Mouth gone dry, Jae nearly hung up.

“Rio?” There was worry in the actress’ voice and it galvanized Jae into speaking.

“It’s me.”

The silence spun out until it seemed it had gone on forever. Even the background noises disappeared in it, the whole world reduced to faint breathing sounds at either end of a cell phone connection.

She couldn’t make the actress talk to her, so Jae stayed quiet, letting Reed decide whether or not to continue with the call.

“Your nephew called.”

The sudden breaking of the silence startled her, and it took a second before she registered what Reed had said. “He did?” Her wits about her now, Jae found it didn’t surprise her that Reed had begun the conversation with a total non sequitur. That had pretty much been the pattern. They’d argue or have a misunderstanding, and they’d get around it through the back door, not really talking about what had happened or how it felt.

“Yes. He wanted to know if he could still play computer games with Rio.”

Reed didn’t elaborate any further, and Jae considered how to prompt the actress. The fact that they were talking about Rio at all had to be a good sign. The actress’ tone of voice was less cold than it had been on the rare occasions they had spoken over the last few days, and she hoped that Reed hadn’t taken her anger out on the boys. “What’d you tell him?”

“I told him he could. I also told him that you’d buy him the ice cream I owe him.”

“Thanks.”

“I didn’t do it for you.”

Silence fell again, and Jae recognized that this time she had to break it. The door felt slightly warmer to the touch than the stairs, and she leaned back against its smooth surface, tucking one leg under her chin. There was so much she wanted to say, needed to say, but over the phone didn’t seem like the right way to do it. She needed to see Reed’s eyes, needed to be able to gauge the other woman’s reactions. *You came for a reason, use it.* She discarded a million ways to ask if Reed was okay, afraid that the question would be misinterpreted. She was guessing, but

from Reed's reaction earlier, what Holly had said to Cait and her own personal experience, she thought it likely that the actress had pulled or at least stretched her groin.

Aware that the silence had stretched on for too long, Jae tried to figure out what to say. *Something, anything.*

"You call for a reason?" Reed spoke again.

"Actually, yes. I called to check up on the injury."

"I see."

Was that disappointment in Reed's voice? Or wishful thinking? Down the street a car honked, brakes squealing on the pavement as a car swerved to avoid what looked to be a cat.

"Where are you?" Reed demanded.

"Your front steps."

"My front steps?" came the disbelieving answer. "You called me from my front steps?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You're still my responsibility." Then she took a deep breath. "And because I was worried about you."

The line went silent again.

"Can I come in?"

"Is the door locked?"

Jae stood up and tried the handle. Locked. "Yes."

"Then no, you can't come in."

"Okay." Jae sat back down. *That's weird. She doesn't sound like she's being mean or trying to make some Lucy pulling the football out from under Charlie Brown 'psych' type joke.* She settled back against the door, once more drawing a leg up, then letting it drop suddenly as she sat up, clues snapping into place. "Reed, why can't you come unlock the door?"

More silence. Then a long exhalation. "Because I can't stand up."

"Oh boy. Is there a spare key out here anywhere?"

"No."

"Any windows open?"

"No."

"This would be a bad time to yell at you for not saying something to someone sooner, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"Just checking. Well, you have two choices. Call your landlord, or we let the ambulance guys chop it down."

"No door number three?"

"No." An owl hooted in the receiver, and then Jae heard it again, this time from overhead. "Where are you?"

"On the back deck."

"Say hello to door number three."

"Are you nuts? The deck is almost 20 feet off the ground."

"Relax. We climbed worse in college. The guys at Phi Delta Theta never knew what hit them." She was already halfway around, when the ground started to slope rapidly away from the house. *Okay, so maybe this isn't such a bright idea.*

"You were in a sorority?"

"Not exactly." No way was she going to explain to Reed what she and the women's soccer team had been doing that night. Unh-unh. "I have to hang-up now. I need both hands for this." *And my head examined.* She laughed softly to herself, lines from a Dire Straits tune reminding her of Cait's Romeo and Juliet remark.

"Jae, don't. Just call the ambulance; let them chop the door down. Fuck the publicity."

Jae pretended not to have heard that last sentence, tucking the cell into one pocket. "Here goes nothing." With that she reached up and grabbed one side of the window frame in her left hand. Using the flexibility from years of kick-boxing, she perched one foot on the sill, and leveraged her body up until she could plant the other foot on the sill, using it as a ledge.

"Jae!" Reed snapped the cell shut in alarm. "Of all the crazy, fucking stupid, tom fool things to do." She thought she could hear scraping sounds from below. *She's really climbing up my balcony.*

Amazing enough that the director had shown up on her doorstep. But now the woman was climbing to her rescue like some knight-errant in the fantasy stories Rio liked to read. Five days ago, she had never wanted to see Jae again. Now Reed didn't want anything more than to see her blonde head pop impishly over the balcony rails.

Reed twisted her body so that she could see the balustrade, clamping her jaw against the wave of nausea that accompanied the movement.

What are you going to do when she gets here?

"Damn." She hadn't thought of that.

People don't climb two stories for kicks.

It was quiet down below. Only the regular sounds of a neighborhood getting ready to call it a night filled the air. "Jae...?" she called hesitantly.

"Yeah?" It was more of a grunt than a word.

“Just checking.”

“To see if I’m alive or dead?” There was a pause. “Sorry. That was uncalled for.” The words were hard to hear, the breeze carrying them away.

Maybe I could just pretend not to have heard that pointed question. Except it was, in a way, a fair comment. “Something like that.”

“Hunh.” This time the noise was more distinct, as though Jae were closer. There was another soft grunt along with a cluster of bumps, then silence.

The deck shook slightly and Reed could hear the rattle of wood vibrating. Her heart was pounding as she watched for the first signs that Jae had made it to the top. She could picture that wall of the house, having spent quite a few evenings lost deep in thought, overlooking the hillside that fell away in a steep slope. As for what Jae was using for handholds—that she didn’t want to contemplate at all.

She also didn’t want to think about why Jae was slowly picking her way up the side of the house. *She cares.*

“Hey.” Jae lifted herself over the rail and dropped lightly to the cedar deck.

“You’re crazy.”

“Maybe.” The director didn’t look to even be breathing hard, a faint glow and a light sheen of perspiration on her brow the only signs that she had been exerting herself at all.

Reed looked away from the green eyes that met hers so steadily, focusing instead on the blanket bunched at the end of the chaise lounge. *Oh fuck.*

So, you have the guts to apologize? Or the class? Reed cleared her throat nervously. “I read your note. Thanks.” *That is not an apology.*

I’m getting there. Slowly she turned back to face Jae, and lifted her eyes ’til they met the director’s. “What I did. That was wrong. I’m sorry.” *As an apology that sucked.*

Jae nodded. “I should have told you sooner. I’d say we have lots to talk about, but right now I’m worried about you. Where’s it hurt?”

Reed gratefully accepted the change in topic, relieved that there seemed to be room left in their relationship to maneuver around the topic for now. “Here.” She indicated the inside of her upper right thigh.

“That’s a good sign.”

“It is?”

“Means it’s not your knee. And you were able to walk on it earlier, so I’m guessing you haven’t torn or ruptured anything. A pull or a strain is

most likely. Can I...?" Jae had knelt down next to the chair, and was indicating her leg.

Reed swallowed. "I'd ... I'd rather you didn't."

"You know something, Reed? Not once in my entire life have I ever forced myself on a woman." The words had an angry, hurt edge to them. Jae looked like there was more that she wanted to say, but instead she closed her mouth then shook her head.

"I ..." Reed struggled to find something to say.

"Let's just drop it, okay?"

"Whatever."

"All right. Can I at least get you into the house?"

"Okay." Agreeing, she was completely unprepared for what came next. Jae simply leaned over and slid one arm under her knees, and one under her back, then stood, lifting her smoothly from the chair. The motion jarred her leg and she winced.

"You all right?" They were inside the house now, and Jae navigated the small space between the balcony door and the living room.

"I could be asking you the same question." Reed kept her tone light, mind spinning. *You gotta ask yourself some pretty serious questions.* She'd thrown one arm around the director's neck and she could feel the smaller woman's heartbeat against her rib cage. *How can one woman make me feel so utterly terrified and completely safe at the same time?*

"I eat my vegetables."

"And bench press what? Two fifty?" She settled gingerly onto the couch, very aware of the places along her body where Jae had been holding her.

Jae laughed, perched on the edge of the sofa. "Not quite. You have a hot water bottle here?"

"I don't think so. Might be something in the bathroom."

"Be right back."

Reed watched Jae leave the room. Alone for a minute, she tried to make sense of the jumbled tangle of reactions the director's presence inspired. One thing was certain; this wasn't going anything like she thought a meeting between the two of them would. On the one hand—there was a certain ease to it, and on the other—a deep awareness that some topics were off limits, as were certain other behaviors they had taken for granted with each other. And that, she knew, was her fault. A week ago if Jae had clambered casually over the balcony, she would have said something like 'You do this for all the ladies?' She most certainly would have let Jae examine the injury.

The microwave beeped loudly, then Jae reappeared in the room, a towel-wrapped object in each hand. “No hot water bottle, but this is even better. Rice.”

“Rice?”

“Yep. I have a rice bag I use on my neck. Works really well—holds an even heat longer. Here, tuck this under your leg, just behind where it meets your ... the top.” She handed one towel over. “Wait ten minutes then switch to this.”

Reed took the second bundle, noting it was cool to the touch. “Ice?”

“Close. The Mr. Freezies you had in your freezer.”

“Thanks.”

Jae smiled the first real smile Reed had seen since the director arrived. “You’re welcome.”

The heat was beginning to seep through her clothes and into the sore muscles, bringing relief. “S is nice.”

“Good.” Jae moved to the end of the long leather couch, leaning back against the cushioned arm, keeping their bodies separate.

To Reed, the space between had the same quality of electric anticipation that the air in Maine did before a summer storm. And when the storm finally broke, either things would be okay between them again, or over. Right now she wanted to pretend, at least for a while, that they were friends, so she refrained from saying anything at all, afraid of upsetting the delicate balance that hung between them.

“You want to see a doctor now or in the morning?” Jae asked quietly.

“No option three?”

“No. But look on the bright side—you get tomorrow off.”

“Tomorrow then.”

“Okay. You should switch packs now. But before you apply the cold, work the muscle gently like this to keep it from stiffening up too badly.” The director demonstrated on her own thigh.

Awkwardly, she tried to reach the same muscle set that Jae’s flexibility and lack of pain allowed her to reach. “Fuck. That hurts.” She gave up and placed the cold pack under her leg.

“I bet it does. I pulled my groin once at a kick-boxing tournament in college. Don’t ever let a guy tell you they have a monopoly on groin injuries and pain.” Jae got up off the couch, picked up the rice pack and headed for the kitchen.

“Did you win?”

“No. Bounced on my butt, first round,” Jae answered from the kitchen, her voice echoing from the other room.

Reed tried to picture that. After tonight she was having a tough time imagining anyone who could beat Jae. From behind, soft footsteps indicated that the slight blonde was returning, the aroma of bergamot accompanying her. “You’re spoiling me.” The quip was out before she could call it back.

Jae didn’t reply straightaway, just handed her a mug of the hot Earl Gray tea and the reheated rice pack. “Well, I have to tell you, there aren’t many people I’d willingly scale a twenty foot wall for.” The director’s eyes sparkled with mirth as she drawled the words.

Hearing them, Reed knew that, while a lot of things had changed between them, a lot had stayed intact. Maybe even enough that they could be friends again. “So why?”

“Why did I scale the wall or why did I come here?”

“Either.”

Jae looked pensive. “As a director, you are my responsibility. That didn’t change just because we had a difference of opinion. You got hurt at work, doing something that I should probably have gotten a stuntie to do after I realized you didn’t know how.”

It was something to think about, and something that marked Jae as different from Roan. Not speaking, she nodded to show Jae she was listening.

“As for the other. If you really want to know, ask me again when we have more time to talk.” One hand ran nervously through her hair as Jae spoke.

“I will.” With that Reed knew she was agreeing to discuss what had happened between them.

“Listen, I need to get going.” Jae dug her cell out of her jacket pocket. “You have a phone book?”

“Why?” she asked, curious as to whom Jae would be calling at this hour.

“I need to call a cab. You need to change to the heat pack now.”

It only took a split second, but Reed made a decision. She hadn’t come up with the words yet, or even a concrete idea about what she wanted to say. There were a lot of issues between them and friendship. But she could make a concrete gesture, and actions spoke louder than words—or so her mother had always said. “Take my car. It’s not like I need it.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah. I can get it when I’m done with the doctor.”

“How about I send a wrangler around eleven to pick you up and take you over to the hospital? Then depending on the verdict, you can either

pick it up or I can drop it off later.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Her eyes were beginning to feel heavy, the heat from the rice pack and the tea doing their job. “Keys are on the hook by the front door.”

Jae nodded and made her way across the living room to the front hallway. “Good night, Reed.”

“Night, Jae.”

The door closed softly behind the director, leaving Reed alone with her thoughts once more. *Is she being straight with me?* She smiled. There was a whole new set of words to use with Jae now, and that wasn’t one of them.

You’re playing with fire.

I know.

On the other side of the room the phone rang, and Reed forced herself off the couch, careful not to put too much weight on her leg. “*Wonder what she forgot?*”

* * *

Jae nearly collapsed against the side of the Range Rover. In the space of ninety minutes a relationship she had thought beyond repair had proven to have some life left in it. How much was uncertain. But the professional end of things was at least working again.

Any more than that was a bonus.

Every muscle in her body ached, and she sank into the soft leather interior gratefully. *I can’t believe I did that. Ah, but ’twas a grand gesture, m’grrl, and ’twas maybe enough to thaw the ice a wee bit, no?* She could all but see the twinkle in her grandfather’s eye. It was the sort of thing she imagined him having done for her grandmother, and it made her smile.

The drive home passed in a blur, and she struggled up the stairs, falling almost at once into a blessedly dreamless sleep.

* * *

The bed was moving, and for an instant Jae thought there was an earthquake, sitting up quickly only to find Antonia standing next to the bed. “Your alarm, it has been ringing for the last fifteen minutes. I only came up to turn it off, thinking you were not at home.”

Jae smiled sleepily at her housekeeper. “S okay. Thanks for waking me up.” A familiar aroma drifted through the air. “Mmm, you made coffee?”

“Don’t I always? I’ll pour some for you while you get ready for work.” The older woman spoke over one shoulder as she descended the stairs.

“Thanks. Oh, and when you do the shopping—just a couple of days worth—we leave for Miami and Michigan on Saturday.”

A half-hour later she was maneuvering the Rover through traffic, having taken a little while to adjust to the difference in vehicle height. The windows made it seem like she was driving a portable fishbowl, and she was glad for the light tint that kept the morning sun at bay.

She slid the car into Reed’s slot, hopped out and jauntily made her way into her office. The shooting schedule would need some minor tinkering to accommodate the actress’ injury—how much tinkering they’d know later, when the doctor made a prognosis. “Morning.” The gargoyle smiled back at her, toothy grin unchanged, the epitome of equanimity.

Cait was leaning against the office door. “You’re in a good mood this morning.”

“Yep. We’re on time, on budget and everyone’s getting along. What’s not to be happy about?”

“You talked to her then?”

“Yes.”

“She apologize for being such a bitch?”

“Not exactly. But I think she understands that just because we had a personal falling out doesn’t mean that I am going to take it out on her at work.” In fact, it seemed as though Reed still had major issues with the gay thing, but she didn’t want to share that with Cait. “I gave her the day off. She needs to get the leg checked just in case.” *Best leave out the Romeo act while I’m censoring the evening. I’m not hearing about that for the rest of the year.* She grabbed her clipboard and sketchbook from the desk.

“I’ll adjust the shooting schedule for today, and we’ll play by ear then.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“Can you get a wrangler to pick her up at eleven? Here are her car keys.”

“Done. Bill wants to see you in editing bay four.”

“All right, I’ll drop by there now.” She wondered what the editor wanted. Last she had checked he was working on the preliminary edits of one of the boardroom scenes, nothing earth shaking.

All in all it was shaping up to be what passed for a normal day, and

later hopefully she and Reed would get a chance to talk about the real issues that were lying between them. “You think she likes Japanese?”

As usual the gargoyle pleaded a silent fifth, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

She threw herself into the routine, concentrating fully on her job. It was coming together, and it looked like the worst was behind them. Two weeks of principal photography would see them move into post production work, and then the fun would really start. Miles and miles of footage would be condensed into a few thousand feet.

Feet up, she was going over the storyboards for the location shoot when Cait knocked on the door. “Hey. I was ready to take a break. What’s up?”

“I sent the wrangler.”

The elation Jae had been feeling all morning slowly drained away as she guessed where this was going. “And?”

“You were wrong. She’s gone.”

Jae didn’t wait to hear more. She raced outside and got in the Saturn, making the twenty-minute drive in less than ten minutes. The door was unlocked, just as she’d left it the night before, and she walked into the house.

The clothes Reed had been wearing lay crumpled on the floor, empty teacup still sat on the end table. On the desk, the handmade picture frame still held its photo. Jae moved into the bedroom. Some clothes were still in the closet, some haphazardly strewn across the bed. The bathroom told the same story—various cosmetics still rested along the vanity shelf, but the red handled toothbrush that had hung there the previous night was gone.

Back in the living room, Jae picked up the photo, running her fingertips across the image. *Gone. But why now? Sunday ... that I could understand. But now?* She felt hollow, the elation from the day sucked away by the realization that maybe her faith in Reed had been misplaced. That this was payback.

For an instant she wondered if Reed had been kidnapped, but couldn’t imagine anyone getting the actress to go someplace she didn’t want to without leaving a trail of blood and destruction in their wake.

Slowly she wandered through the house again, eyes taking in details, looking for some clue as to where Reed had gone. In the hallway, she found the toothbrush sitting next to the phone book, which was open to the taxi section of the yellow pages. Jae stopped, puzzled. “Well I give. I have no idea where your mother’s gone.”

Unless.

Jae locked the door behind her and headed back to the car, hoping that just this once she was wrong.

THIRTY-THREE

"You're overreacting." Jae looked at herself in the rearview mirror. "She's got the day off. What she does with it is up to her." She ignored the jumbled mess at Reed's house as well as the fact that Reed wasn't answering her cell.

Reed had done nothing to merit the assumption that she had taken off, and Jae felt slightly guilty that she, of all people, had assumed the worst without any proof. It didn't stop her from mentally replaying last night's conversation, searching for something that might have set Reed off. Instead she was left with the opposite feeling. The only real problem had been Reed not wanting her to look at the injury, and while it had angered her at the time, Jae could understand Reed's reluctance to have someone she had just discovered was gay take an up close look at her groin. Everything else had left her feeling like there was hope for them to sort things out.

The vague unease that had made her stomach clench earlier was back, and Jae tried not to think of the other reason Reed might have bolted suddenly.

Traffic was light and she made good time back to the studio, arriving with time to spare before filming began. One part of her mind was already running through the footage that she planned to shoot. The need to get on with her job forced her worry about Reed into the background.

Confidently, she moved over the set, checking the set-up and angles, making last minute alterations while she waited for Gwen and Evans to finish in wardrobe. Tomorrow they would be joined once again by Jared Sykes, who as Kerry's father, Senator Stuart, would film his scenes with Evans and Gwen, then move on to finish the ones with Reed and Gwen.

What will you do if she has split? Jae didn't want to think about that. Without Reed to finish the picture, it was game over. They had filmed too much to start again and stay in budget, and not quite enough to cobble it together without her.

"Any luck?" Cait asked, entering the set, a stack of shot reports neatly bundled in one hand.

Feigning a total lack of concern, Jae casually leaned against a sound cart. "Just a change in timings."

"Oh." The AD both looked and sounded skeptical, and for a second Jae thought that Cait was going to call her on the baldfaced lie.

Jae trailed Caitlynn across the set to where the storyboard was posted,

mentally retracking in preparation for Gwen's scenes with Rafe Evans.

They hadn't gotten quite the chemistry between them she had been looking for but antagonism was there in spades, and that was working out almost as well. Better in some ways, really. Removing any hint of sexual chemistry between Kerry and Kyle's characters increased what Holly referred to as the "slime factor," while magnifying the chemistry that Reed and Gwen were demonstrating as Dar and Kerry. *Reed. Not now, concentrate. Just put her out of your mind and focus.* One hand rubbed at a temple, willing the beginnings of a headache to fade into the background—at least until she got through the next few hours.

* * *

"Nothing. How can someone not have an address?" Jae threw down her pencil in disgust. In two hours she hadn't been able to find out anything about Reed that she didn't already know. In fact, she had become painfully aware just how many personal details Reed had shared with her that weren't written down or otherwise common knowledge. *And you shared what?*

The worst part was the uncertainty. Was Reed even gone? She did, after all, have the day off, and there was no rule that said the actress had to see the doctor exactly when told to. *Except her laptop is gone.* The way rumours flew around a movie set, Jae knew she had to be careful about the kinds of inquiries she made. Which also, for now, precluded calling Reed's agent.

The house lease in the Hills was made out to Reed Lewis c/o Blackmon Pictures, and even the Rover wasn't in her name—just Blackmon's, as was the phone. It made sense though. The last person Reed would have wanted to know where she really lived was Roan, and until recently, Roan was Blackmon Pictures.

A deep rap sounded at the door and she swept the evidence of her search into the top drawer of her desk. "Come in."

As it swung inwards, the door revealed the tall form of the executive producer. Rod Chambers strolled easily into the room, suit neatly pressed, and settled himself into one of the canvas chairs that flanked her desk. "Got a minute?" It wasn't a question, more of a command request.

Jae leaned back in her own chair. "Sure. What can I do for you?"

"You can explain where Ms. Lewis is. The crew seems to think that she walked off the set yesterday."

“Barely.” She paused and gave a light laugh. “Seriously, Reed pulled her groin doing a scene yesterday. I saw her last night and had to give her a couple of days off. No big deal. Cait rearranged a couple of scenes and cleared her schedule.” The best option seemed to be a blend of the truth and wishful thinking.

Dark eyes studied her own and Jae had to fight to hold his gaze. Lying was not her strong suit, and she hated to do it. *If you’ve bailed on me for anything less than Rio, I am going to kill you.*

“There’s also a rumour that the two of you have had some kind of lover’s quarrel.”

This time she could tell the complete truth. “Not a lover’s quarrel. She found out I was gay. But as you’ve seen from the rushes over the last few days, that hasn’t had much impact on her performance.”

He nodded. “Given her reputation and past behaviour, I had to ask.”

There was nothing she could say to that. She couldn’t very well tell him the truth about why Reed had walked off the set of *Torque* years ago, and why—if the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach was right—the actress may have done it again. “We may run into a scheduling problem though.”

“On time, Cavanaugh. We discussed that.”

She took a deep breath. *You so owe me, Reed.* “Well if Ms. Lewis’ groin needs more than a couple of days to heal, it will set us back two weeks minimum. Now I can recover most of that from post-production, and I have some padding in the film budget from cutting out the fancier stuff in the original script. The special effects for the tropical storm are still under budget. We got some good live footage while we were down there.” She didn’t mention that they had yet to locate the Miami tape.

“What exactly are you asking me?”

“For room to maneuver under the schedule. It would be irresponsible of me not to have a back-up plan in place in the event that Reed can’t work for a bit. We can get a lot of tape with her in a chair but most of the intense stuff is over the next couple of weeks. It is a work related injury—we’re covered for that.”

Chamber’s appeared to consider the request. The production bond would cover any worker’s compensation related issues. “No extra money. On budget. How you accomplish that is up to you.”

It was enough of a concession. “Thank you.” The time had worried her more than the money, and Chambers had just given her the time.

Chambers grunted in acknowledgement and stood up. “So far I’ve liked what I’ve seen. You’ve gotten material out of Lewis that I didn’t

think was possible. Hell, I understand you even got Evans to behave—for him.” With that, he left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Elated, Jae dropped back into her chair. *Okay ... what I need here is a plan.* There were two scenarios and both involved Reed having left, only the “why” was different. And the solution to both was exactly the same. Find Riordan and she’d find Reed.

The telephone rang and her hand leapt across the distance. “Cavanaugh.”

“Jacqueline?”

“Hello, Mother. I can’t really talk right now. I’m expecting a call.”

“You’ve been avoiding my calls all week.”

“No, Mother, I haven’t—I’ve just been extremely busy. I’ll have more time soon, okay?” Jae decided that a conciliatory tone would get her out of this conversation faster than taking the confrontational route.

She continued to listen with half an ear, making a list of the things she would need to cover for in order to make sure that no one realized that Reed was gone. It would be so much easier if Reed would just call, but Jae doubted the mercurial actress would ask for help if she needed it. Heck, it would be much easier if Reed weren’t so secretive. *I have no idea how I’m going to pull this off and still keep your secret.* A word caught her attention. “What was that about dinner?”

An exasperated sigh nearly made her chuckle. “Honestly, Jacqueline. I said, your father and I would love to see you for dinner when we drive down to see Danielle next week.”

“That sounds nice, but I leave for the location shoots Saturday—first Miami, then Michigan. Look I really do have to go. Love to you and Daddy.”

“We love you too, Jacqueline.”

Jae looked at the phone in shock. An ‘I love you’ and no lectures? “Night.” Without replacing the receiver, she dialed a familiar number. On the third ring a machine picked up, and she waited for the beep. “Hey. It’s me. I need a really big favour. You can call me anytime tonight.”

She hung up the phone and ticked off a mark on her paper. With any luck, she had just found the breathing room she needed. Now all she needed was to find Rio. How hard could it be to find a Riordan Lewis in the state of Maine?

Reed stared out the window, waiting for the plane to taxi out of the gate and onto the runway. The faster they could get in the air, the faster she could check on Rio. The flight was half empty, and she had a row of three seats to herself. Gingerly she stretched out her leg, aware of the pain for the first time since the phone call two hours earlier.

It had been a possibility. They had all known that.

And now it was reality.

A waking nightmare a thousand times scarier than the worst ones that gripped her nights, stealing sleep. This nightmare had the power to steal her soul.

Dark curls framing a round, far too pale face. The shallow rise and fall of a tiny chest as a respirator forced air into lungs unable to cope on their own. A white bandage, over the skin under which his heart lay, hid the red wound twice the size of his delicate hands. Now there would be a fresh bandage over the long healed scar. Reed closed her eyes to block out the images only to find they followed her into the darkness, made sharper by her unwillingness to face them.

Opening her eyes, she tried to focus on how lucky they had been. By some chance twist of fate, Geoff had taken Rio with him to a computer trade show, putting them minutes instead of hours from a hospital well enough equipped to handle the sudden explosion of a tiny piece of rubber, as the balloon valve finally ruptured. An ambulance crew had been on site at the hotel, and somehow they had kept Rio alive long enough for the doctors to whisk him into surgery.

She blinked away a tear. Right now he was in an operating theatre, hanging on to life with everything his determined soul had. While they waited. The seatbelt and no-smoking signs were still on and that meant no airphone, no email. Just an agonizing wait. As soon as she closed her eyes she could hear the phone ringing again, waking her from a light half doze and catapulting her into instant wakefulness.

“Reed ... it’s Rio.”

Her legs let go and she fell heavily to the floor, the brief humour of Jae’s parting subsumed in the sheer panic Heidi’s words triggered. “Is...?” She couldn’t ask.

“He’s in the operating room.”

“Alive.” She hadn’t realized she’d spoken the word aloud, like some prayer to any god who would listen.

“He’s a fighter, Reed. He’ll make it.” Heidi spoke fiercely, the words as much for herself as for Reed.

Reed let them echo in her mind now, concentrating with all her might on the fact that he was alive. And as long as he was alive, they had a chance.

The seatbelt sign went off, and she snatched the airphone from its cradle, her credit card already in hand. Several rounds of electronic beeps filled her ear before the connection was made and the phone rang.

"How is he?"

"Still in the operating room. Dr. Zerafa just went in."

That news brought a small measure of relief. She trusted the heart specialist and knew he would do everything possible to save Rio. *And if he can't?* Reed thrust the doubt down, emotionally unable to play "what if" games. "I should be there by midnight."

"They let you go?"

"No."

"Guess you can kiss the Oscar good-bye." The joke was hollow and flat, an unsuccessful attempt at raising both their spirits.

"Fuck the Oscar."

"I know." Heidi paused, and she heard the muted sounds of Geoff's voice. "Geoff will meet you at the airport. What airline are you coming in on?"

"I don't know. Let me check." When she'd left the house she hadn't even had a ticket, and there were no travel agents open at two a.m. On the way to the airport, she'd checked schedules and gotten flights, nearly missing the next flight out of LAX. Reed flipped open the ticket packet and tried to sort out the jumble of timings. In order to get to Maine, she had purchased a ticket on a four a.m. flight to England, but would get off the plane in Chicago. At O'Hare, she needed to transfer to another airline, which would take her to New York, Boston and then on to Bangor. Circuitous, but, given both the short notice and the relative isolation of her destination, it was the fastest route that she could find with available seats. "American Airlines, flight 358, arriving eleven p.m. local time."

"Geoff'll be there to pick you up."

"I'll call again in an hour."

"He'll make it."

Reed accepted the reassurance Heidi offered. "I know. By the time I get there, he'll probably be trying to use the IV stand as a skateboard again."

"Or the bedpans as drums." Heidi's voice cracked.

"How you holding up?"

"The truth? I'm scared. He looked so small and pale on the gurney when they wheeled him out of ER." Her friend was crying, and she could hear Geoff trying to calm the sobs that suddenly came through the line. A couple of long minutes passed, and Reed let her own silent tears fall, then Heidi spoke again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be falling apart on you like this."

"You love him too."

"Hold on." The phone was muffled, voices coming through faintly.

Reed tensed and leaned forward, pulling her leg awkwardly, and she groaned.

"You okay?" Geoff asked.

"Fine. Just moved the wrong way. What's going on?" Her imagination was already supplying scenario after scenario, and she fought to keep the sudden fear from escalating.

"Zerafa just motioned Heidi over. He doesn't look panicked, and Heidi looks relieved. Here she comes."

"Reed?"

"Yes." She gripped the armrest and listened.

"They've got the bleeding under control and replaced the balloon valve with a new one."

"What's wrong?" She picked up on the tangible fear in Heidi's tone.

"They had to stop before they could finish constructing the new valve ... he went into full arrest ... it took them almost five minutes to revive him."

All the noise around Reed faded out of awareness. Even Heidi's voice blended into the nonsensical background noise as the full implication hit home. Rio had been without blood and oxygen to his brain twice, so Zerafa didn't want to risk further surgery, either because he wasn't sure there was anything to risk it for, or he didn't want to risk a third deprivation—one Rio might not recover from. Instinct took over and she let another part of who she was surface, calling on assimilated pieces of people who didn't exist. "What's his condition listed as?"

Heidi responded to the medical terminology, her professional training surfacing. "They have him listed as critical. He's on a respirator, and when he leaves recovery they are going to send him to the main CICU until they have a bed in paediatric ICU. We should know more in a couple of hours."

A mental image of Rio hooked to a machine superimposed itself on the memory of an infant in an incubator, hooked to a jumble of wires and machines bigger than he was, and Reed nearly lost her hard-won

control. "I'll call back then. He'll be fine." She tried to give Heidi the reassurance that she knew she herself needed so desperately. *He'll be fine. He has to be.*

"American, 358 right?"

"Right. Heidi...?"

"What?"

"If you can—if you get a chance—kiss him for me and tell him, tell him, Mummy loves him and he better not forget it."

"I will."

"Thanks," she whispered, then disconnected the phone.

To her left, the dark night sky was broken only by the intermittent flash of the light on the long wing—no stars or moon to wish on.

Closing her eyes she tried to sleep, aware that every ounce of energy she had would be needed over the next ten hours.

* * *

"This is the final boarding call for American Airlines flight 358 departing to La Guardia, Boston, terminating in Bangor. Once again, this is the final boarding call for all passengers on American Airlines flight 358. All passengers should now be on board."

Reed ignored the shooting pain in her leg as she struggled to get to the gate. American Airlines was housed in terminal three, and her flight had arrived at terminal two, not leaving much time to switch planes. It had been the fastest route though. She spotted the sign for concourse H, and uniformed attendants answering questions. "My flight is in final boarding." The words were out before she halted her motion.

The attendant took one look at her limping, tired body and radioed for a courtesy car. "It's all right, ma'am. We'll get you on your flight." He took her ticket and examined it. "You don't have a boarding pass?"

"No," Reed answered. The need to switch airlines in Chicago had made it impossible for her to be ticketed through to Bangor from LAX.

He nodded then spoke into the radio. "I have a passenger Lewis, flight 358."

A squawk and a burst of static accompanied the response. "Door's still open. Let me check for a seat."

She resisted the impulse to say anything, and just sat down on the motorized cart. The driver pulled away smoothly, heading for the gate while the other attendant continued to work on getting her a seat. They arrived at the gate in moments, the car capable of moving much more

quickly than she could.

“Ms. Lewis, all passengers who do not check in....”

“I couldn’t check in—I was in the air. Now, I need to be on that flight.” They had been delayed several hours in Las Vegas due to severe storms, and had been nearly stranded by the weather. It had made what should have been an easy connection to her four o’clock flight virtually impossible.

“I’m sorry but that flight is full.”

“You don’t understand....”

“Hold on.” Another burst of static and the gate agent plugged one ear with her finger. “Do you have any luggage?”

“No.”

“We can’t get you on this plane, but we can get you a seat on flight 1244 to Boston, then on to Bangor, arriving ten p.m.”

Reed closed her mouth. That was an hour earlier than her original flight had been scheduled to land. Gratefully, she nodded at the other woman. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s get a boarding pass for you, and then Henry will take you to the gate. It’s just down the hall a little ways.” A genuine smile framed the young woman’s lips.

Overhead the final boarding call was given for her new flight, and Reed looked anxiously toward the counter.

“Don’t worry. They know you are coming. Seat 14b, Gate 12.”

The ticket stubs and boarding passes were handed back, and suddenly they were on their way. Taking advantage of the first available minute she had had to call since the storms had set in, Reed pulled out her cell and dialed Heidi again.

“Hello,” Geoff whispered, unexpectedly answering the phone.

“It’s me.”

“Reed. Thank God. Where are you?”

“Just leaving O’Hare. We hit a major storm front. How’s Rio?”

“Still hasn’t regained consciousness, but last time Heidi asked, his vitals were good.”

The electric car came to a halt at the gate and Reed got off, handing the boarding pass to the gate attendant. “Where’s Heidi?”

“Right here. She fell asleep.”

“I’m sorry, Geoff.”

“Don’t be. We knew the score when we agreed to help. I wouldn’t have missed any of it.”

It lessened her guilt a fraction, the part of her that felt she should be

there instead of Heidi and Geoff unwilling to let her off the hook. There weren't any words she could find, so instead she changed the subject, aware that she had only moments left before being asked to turn off the phone. "I had a flight change, American flight 1244, arrives 10:00 p.m." Three and a half hours was all that separated her from her son, but to Reed it felt like forever.

"I'll be there."

"Thanks. I better go. They are getting ready to shut the doors."

"See you soon." He paused, then added, "We're here for him and for you."

"I know. Bye." They were there for Riordan—that she could believe. As far as she was his mother, for her too, but only on that level. And even that was awkward at times, especially when she first returned from a trip, and Heidi and Geoff had to share him again.

Reed shut the cell phone off, severing the connection. They were there because she had something they wanted and needed, and the arrangement worked for all four of them. But no one had been there for her in a long time.

Wrong. The word came with an image of Jae's tousled head popping over the balcony. *She was.*

Reed stared across the aisle, and into the gray sky. Whatever fledging steps their relationship had taken last night had most likely been destroyed in the wake of her sudden disappearance. *Will Jae even talk to me now?*

Do you want her to?

Yes. But that was something that would have to wait.

How long? The question was taking her in a direction she didn't want to—couldn't face—going in. Not now, not just yet. Rio came first.

THIRTY-FOUR

“Okay. No Riordan Lewis. Hardly surprising, I guess, that a seven-year-old isn’t listed with the DMV or any other state agency.” Jae spoke more to herself than to the gargoyle, though as usual he listened patiently. She crumpled the fax, tossing it over her shoulder where it dropped through a makeshift hoop and into the waste bin.

It was dead end after dead end. Even the phone interview with Heidi had been shrouded in mystery—Reed’s friend had called them. And just to top it off she couldn’t remember the woman’s last name. Part of her kept thinking it was Doctor Chapel but that was *Star Trek*. As for the airlines ... between the red tape of customer confidentiality, and the fact that three hundred planes had flown out of LAX within two hours of when she suspected Reed had left, it had proved to be worse than a dead end. She was quickly running out of ideas. It seemed that the actress had taken paranoia to a whole new level when it came to hiding her son from Roan Pirsig and the rest of the world. *Roan....*

Electrified, Jae jumped out of her chair and grabbed the small box of things she’d taken out of Roan’s office. There it was. A legal-sized manila folder labeled “Reed Lewis” rested where she’d placed it after cleaning out her mentor’s office. Going over to the couch, she settled on one end, then mentally braced for what she might or might not find within the slim packet.

Neat, block letters filled a page in front of her while the opposite side held a black and white 8x10 glossy of a young woman on the steps of what looked to be a college of some sort. It was the eyes, Jae realized. Only the eyes were the same. And it must have been the eyes that drew Roan.

Her own eyes drifted across to the notes and photocopied news articles, and she began to read. Not until the sentences blurred and ran, ink pulled by the tears that had splattered onto the coldly distilled words of a child’s nightmare used to forge a woman’s chains, did Jae realize she was crying.

In her hands she held the blueprint Roan had used to manipulate Reed emotionally, the tragic facts of her life nothing more to him than a means of control. Phrases jumped out off the page, and she slammed the file shut, not wanting to see her friend profiled and dissected.

Swallowing, Jae leaned her head forward, hands twined in her hair, while she digested the information. She’d known that Reed was an

orphan. What she hadn't known was that the fire department had found an unconscious Reed still clinging to the door of the room where the rest of her family had died. The handle had been covered in blood from the wounds on the child's hands, where splinters had dug under the skin as she had tried to force the door open. And Roan's only commentary had been—"Lewis has no surviving family, no place she belongs. Use of words like family, belong, safe, should trigger the desired response."

Horried, she threw the file down in disgust. *How had she done it? How had Reed survived all of that? And how was she coping now?*

She no longer had the slightest doubt about what had driven Reed to disappear. It had to be Rio. Looking again at the file where it lay splayed on the floor, Jae tried to conceive of what it must have been like to lose your entire family, and then to face losing another one all over again. She couldn't.

A yawn crept out of its hiding place and Jae looked at the clock, surprised to find that it was already three in the morning. Three more hours and the studio would burst to life, another day of filming started.

Hard to believe that slightly more than twenty-four hours ago things had seemed so full of promise. "How long after I left did you?" She tried to puzzle it out. If Reed had left right after she did, it would still have taken at least an hour and a half to get to LAX, and the earliest flight out she could have taken would have been at around four a.m. Factoring in the time change, Reed should have arrived on the East Coast by about six p.m. Pacific Time. That was nine hours ago. So why hadn't she called?

"Now there's a dumb question." The stone ornament silently agreed, its large eyes watching her solemnly. "I doubt I'd be my first priority either." Reed was probably focused entirely on Rio, and though it made life hell for her, it was something, having watched Danielle with the twins, that she could fully understand. It didn't make her any less angry at being left hanging, but she could at least understand.

On the desk her notes looked back up at her, and Jae made another tick next to an item, drumming the pencil against the paper, thinking about which item to tackle next. She couldn't lie to Cait indefinitely. Not only did it make her uncomfortable to lie to her friend, but if she had a hope in Hades of pulling this off, she was going to need Cait's help.

I'm going to need a storyboard to just to keep track of the lies and half-truths I've told today, not to mention the rest of it.

There was nothing she could do about that at this hour. The AD would be in soon enough, and they could make a plan then. Maybe Cait

would be able to push a few buttons on the Internet and voilà, instant actress location. Of course she had to survive the angry lecture that was sure to come with the confession.

* * *

Six a.m. and the hospital corridors were beginning to come to life around her. Nurses were changing shift and patients were being checked, visual reassurance that monitors and respirators were functioning properly.

In his bed Rio slept, unaware of the new day and the victory it brought. In the blankets, he looked so small, the pale white of his skin nearly lost in the crisp whiteness of the sheets. Only the dark curls provided a reference point, but Reed didn't need to see his face to know what he looked like.

Just twenty-six hours ago he had been awake, early even for him, the excitement of going to a grown-up breakfast and a chance to see the newest technology having made it impossible for him to sleep. *I should have been there.*

If you had been home, you'd have been in Eastport, nowhere near a hospital this well equipped.

Had he understood what was happening to him? Did he call out for me?

Stop. You can't play this game right now.

Balanced on the stool Geoff had stolen from somewhere deep in the bowels of Eastern Maine Medical Center, she continued to stare through the window into the cardiac intensive care unit, separated from her son by an inch of glass that might as well have been the three thousand miles she had just traveled. Arriving after eleven, she hadn't been allowed in to see him, consigned instead to the hall and her perch.

"Ms. Lewis?" A gentle hand touched her shoulder. "You can go in for a minute now if you'd like."

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak through the sudden upwelling of tears.

"You need to put these on, okay?"

Reed traded the blue Navy sweatshirt she'd stolen from the set for a loose-fitting beige surgical scrub shirt and a facemask, then hobbled after the nurse. The bed had been lowered and a chair placed next to it. From inside a plastic bag tucked in the top corner of the bed next to Rio's head, a tape recording that she had made for him of "The Swiss Family Robinson" was playing softly. Carefully she reached over and

turned it off, the large buttons easy to manipulate through the sterile plastic.

“You’re gonna miss the best part if you don’t wake up soon, kiddo.” She tucked a stray curl back into place with a gloved hand, her touch lingering to stroke his brow. “I love you. Remember that, okay?” Words were hard to find, the need to be optimistic and cheerful warring with her desire to just crush him against her body, holding him here by sheer force of will.

Her voice was ragged, tired from the long trip and the two days without sleep, but softly she began to sing Rio’s favorite song.

“A spaceman came travelling on his ship from afar, ’twas light years of time since his mission did start, And over a village he halted his craft, And it hung in the sky like a star, just like a star.

“He followed a light and came down to a shed, Where a mother and a child were lying there on a bed, A bright light of silver shone round his head, And he had the face of an angel, and they were afraid.

“Then the stranger spoke, he said ‘Do not fear, I come from a planet a long way from here, And I bring a message for mankind to hear,’ And suddenly the sweetest music filled the air.

“And it went la, la, la, la, la, la,, la, la, la, la, la, Peace and goodwill to all men, and love for the child....

“This lovely music went trembling through the ground, And many were wakened on hearing that sound, And travellers on the road, the village they found, By the light of that ship in the sky, which shone all round....

“And just before dawn at the paling of the sky, The stranger returned and said ‘Now I must fly, When two thousand years of your time has gone by, This song will begin once again, to a baby’s cry...’

“And it went la la.... This song will begin once again to a baby’s cry. And it goes la la.... Peace and goodwill to all men and love for the child.

“Oh the whole world is waiting, waiting to hear that song again, There are thousands standing on the edge of the world, And a star is moving somewhere, the time is nearly here, This song will begin once again, to a baby’s cry....”

She let the words trail off, tears stinging her eyes. “Pretty bad I guess, hunh? Chris de Burgh I’m not. I have a friend though. She could do it justice. Jae could probably even play it on the guitar. You met her and her nephew Alex. Alex called yesterday.” *Was it yesterday? What was today? Friday? Wednesday then. Two days ago.* “Wednesday. Seemed pretty eager to let you beat up on him in Proton again. Wake up, Rio.

Please.” She held his hand in hers, head down on the bed, while she continued to stroke his brow, letting touch say what she no longer had words for.

“Ms. Lewis? It’s time to go. We need to change his dressing.”

The same friendly nurse had returned, and Reed lifted her head.

“Dr. Zerafa just called. He’s on his way over to talk to you, and he’ll meet you in the family room across the hall in about twenty minutes.”

Reluctantly she stood, and though she knew it wasn’t allowed, pulled her face mask down. The nurse met her eyes then deliberately turned away. “Thank you,” she whispered, then leaned down, planting a light kiss on each of his eyelids. “I love you.” Straightening up, she pulled the mask back over her face, then turned the tape back on. “That’ll need to be flipped over soon.”

“We’ll take care of it. Is that your voice?” The nurse, whose name badge identified her as Barbara, asked, leading the way past the other beds and out of the room.

“Yes.” Reed let the mask fall again to her neck, retaining it and the shirt for later. The tapes had been made during the long nights of trips to Japan, as she tried to pass a love of classics on to her son.

“You have a lovely voice. What was it you were singing?”

Reed knew the nurse was just trying to be friendly, the questions designed to take her mind off of her troubles for a minute or two, so she smiled wanly instead of snarling back. “Just a song Rio likes.”

Inside the family room Heidi was slumped against Geoff, his head tilted back against the wall, eyes shut. One of her smaller hands was twined with his, the other curled around his waist. For some reason he always reminded her of a large teddy bear, though Rio seemed to view him more as a horse. Reed watched them for a long second, aware now—as she hadn’t been before—of what she was missing. That there was no one to hold her against the storm threatening to break over them all. Jae had reminded her what it was like to have safety and comfort in someone else’s strength and for an instant that was exactly where she wished she could be.

“Hey.” She reached over and touched Geoff’s shoulder. “You awake?”

“Ayup.” The sudden start to his body giving lie to the claim.

“Better wake Heidi. Alan Zerafa’s on his way over.”

Geoff came fully awake, and he shook Heidi gently. “Wake up, sweetheart.”

Heidi came awake faster even than her husband had. “What’s wrong?” One hand rubbed absently at her eyes, brushing away the signs of sleep

from still tired eyes.

“Doctor’s on his way up to talk to us.” Even to her, her voice sounded tight.

“Oh.” Heidi turned to face her. “How is he?”

“Still sleeping.” It was easier to say that than use the word “unconscious.” Reed sat down on the chair opposite her friends and watched the door, waiting. The sick dread that she had been pushing away, refusing to acknowledge was back, was leaving her feeling very small and alone. “Excuse me. I need to make a phone call.”

“Now?”

“Yes.” Because Reed knew that if she didn’t make it now, she might not ever make it.

* * *

Cait was beginning to get the sense that Jae was avoiding her. No matter where she went on the set, the director had just left or was expected momentarily. “Methinks there is something rotten in the state of Denmark.”

She’d known Jae long enough to recognize when she was being lied to, and when something was eating at the director. It was obvious why Jae was avoiding her: Lewis had done a runner, and now the director was covering for the actress. Cait left wardrobe and started back towards the main offices. On the way she passed the second unit crew which was busy packing up for the return trip to Miami. Jae could fudge with the schedule here all she wanted, but without a lead actress in Miami it was all money down the drain.

Even if Lewis came back, and that she’d believe when she saw it, Jae had to get a grip. It was abundantly clear that her friend had no perspective where the actress was concerned.

Inside her pocket her cell began to vibrate, and she dug it out, checking the number before accepting the call. “Hey, babe, what’s up?”

Thom chuckled, “Whenever you say that, I get an urge to look over my shoulder and find the woman you’re talking to. I got the address you wanted. You were right, we did have it on file.”

“Hold on.” She slid the Palm Pilot out of its case, made a few taps with the stylus and opened an address entry. “Okay, go ahead.”

“Lewis lives in a rented cottage on the property of her friend, Dr. Heidi Chappelle, her husband and son. Seems to keep a pretty low profile. Most of what we have is in regards to her disappearance from

Pirsig's film and her popularity in Japan."

"Where is it?"

"Eastport, Maine. Pretty close to the Canadian border, tucked up in the Bay of Fundy. I don't have a street address, just a rural route and a farm name."

"Figures."

Thom laughed again. "You know that I am sitting on a pretty big story, right?"

"You're an editor, hon. It's your job to sit on stories. But I promise you a bigger one, okay?"

"I'd settle for dinner and a movie."

"Deal. Now what's the name of the farm?"

"Fairsing Farms, rural route number three."

"Thanks, babe, big kiss."

"No problem. Dinner tonight? I'll cook."

"Umm, sounds lovely, but I have no idea what's going to happen here today. Can we wing it?"

"Yep. Head over if you want dinner. There isn't anything I cook that takes longer than fifteen minutes, so it won't matter what time you get here."

"I'll see you tonight then. Bye."

"Bye."

It was tough to get too bent out of shape about stuff with Thom's quietly reassuring presence in her life. Nothing much seemed to faze him, he just carried on—helping where he could and listening when he couldn't.

She didn't know why Pirsig had let Lewis go when she'd walked off his set, but she'd be damned if she was going to let Lewis ruin this for Jae. Damned if she'd let Jae ruin it for Jae, either. Armed with Reed's whereabouts, she headed for her friend's office, and hopefully the truth.

The door to the director's office was ajar and she could hear Jae talking to someone on the phone. No matter, she knew where Jae was, and it would keep five minutes. But then, ready or not, Jae had some explaining to do.

* * *

Jae heard the sharp, staccato footfalls move along the hallway and pause briefly at the door, before continuing down the hall. She exited her office and crossed to Cait's.

Cait's door was wide open. Jae steeled herself against the thunderstorm about to hit and knocked on the wooden frame. "Can I come in?"

"You're the boss."

Oh oh, this is bad. The only time Cait ever referred to her that way was when the AD had a point to make—usually about personal stuff crossing the line. "And that has stopped you before, when exactly?" *Best to get this out now.*

"Okay. What the bloody hell are you thinking? It's obvious what you're thinking with. Did you chuck your ethics out the fucking window?"

"On second thought, I'll come back when you can stop swearing at me."

"What, Jae? Can't face the truth? You are putting this picture at risk—and for what? That is so not like you, so what's going on? Because from where I sit it looks like Lewis is gone, and you're pretending nothing happened."

Cait was just getting started, and Jae decided to let the AD get it off her chest. Without the phone call that had come through while she'd been rummaging around in wardrobe Cait's accusations would have more than a grain of truth to them. She'd missed the call, it having been to her office number rather than the cell but caller ID had given her a lead and she'd eagerly followed it. The number had turned out to be to a pay phone at Eastern Maine Medical Center. There had been no message, but the fact of the call had been enough. It had to have come from Reed, and a call from a hospital meant that Rio was the reason she had left without a word.

"You're not even listening to me, are you?"

"No," Jae said honestly. "I was just sort of waiting until you were done. Are you done?"

"No. You might not know or care where she is—"

"What makes you think I don't know where she is?"

"Every time her name is spoken, I swear you're going to tear a bald patch in your hair, the way you are twisting it. Not to mention the fact that you lied to me yesterday. And while we're on that topic—that hurt. Either you trust me, or you don't. You're not the only one with stuff at stake here, you know."

"Touché." Chagrined, Jae walked to the window, thinking. Self-consciously, she kept her fingers out of her hair, the nail of her index finger picking at her thumb instead. *Do I have the right to tell her? Wrong*

question, m'grrl. Do ye trust her—that's the one she's asking. She'd tried to avoid a lecture about Reed's unreliability and had gotten a different one instead. And the bottom line was, she needed Cait's help. But do you trust her? Yes. No doubts. All the way. Forgive me, Reed. But to keep your secrets from the rest of the world, I may have to share them with Caitlynn.

"Jae?"

Cait had come up beside her and Jae looked over at her friend, searching for the right words.

"Hey. What's wrong, hon?" The AD wiped away a tear, and enfolded her in a hug. "It'll be okay. We'll figure something out, okay? Even if I have to drag her back from that farm in Eastport with a team of horses."

Letting the tears flow, Jae made her decision. "She's not in Eastport. She's at Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor." Then, while Cait held her she let the details tumble out, holding back only the name of Riordan's father.

"Oh Christ, Jae. I'm so sorry. How is he?"

"I don't know. I don't know how either of them are."

THIRTY-FIVE

Heidi watched Reed limp slowly back into the room, her shoulders slumped even more than when she had left it. She squeezed Geoff's hand and stood up. "You know, if you were a horse, we'd have to shoot you." Reed was skittish at the best of times, and Heidi knew that a direct approach to an emotional issue was not a good idea. The actress would totally shut them out.

"Hunh?"

"The way you're hobbling around. If you were a horse, I'd have to shoot you. Now c'mere." Before Reed could protest, she steered the taller woman to a seat next to Geoff.

"They don't shoot horses anymore, do they?"

"Ayup. The stubborn ones." That got a weak snort of laughter, and Heidi settled herself on Reed's other side, hooking a chair to prop their feet up on as she sat. "Are you going to let me take a look at that?" Something flashed behind the blue eyes but was gone before she could get a handle on what it was.

"No. But I might be convinced to let a real doctor do it—one that won't shoot me."

Just then Dr. Zerafa entered the room, a friendly smile lighting his careworn face. "Heidi, Geoff." He nodded in their direction, acknowledging their presence. "It's good to see you again, Reed. I just wish it had been under better circumstances."

Next to her, Heidi could feel Reed tense, though the expression on the actress' face never changed. Half expecting it to be ignored, she reached over to squeeze Reed's hand, surprised when she didn't pull away from the touch. She let her hand remain where it was and left it to Reed to handle the doctor.

"How is he?"

Zerafa sat in the chair opposite them, removing the stethoscope from around his neck and tucking it into a pocket as he sat. "I just had a look in on him. We're going to upgrade his condition from critical to serious."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"We've scheduled a CT scan for later this morning. That should tell us whether there are any abnormalities indicating impaired brain function."

Heidi noticed he avoided using the word damage. "How are his

vitals?”

The doctor appeared to brighten somewhat, and Reed relaxed a touch at the sign.

“Strong. His blood pressure is good; pulse rate is normal. His lungs are a little congested, but the respirator is taking the brunt of the load. Reflexes are good, and I don’t think we are looking at a possible coma. I think his body is just getting the rest it needs. Which is what you should be doing. He’s going to need you when he wakes up.”

Heidi knew it was an old medical trick, one she used with the owners of her own patients. They would believe because she did—and sometimes belief could make miracles.

“Thank you.” Reed spoke, the ragged tiredness in her voice filling the room.

“You’re welcome. Now go on, get some sleep. I’ll meet with you again this afternoon after we’ve run the tests and have more information.” He got up and left the room, leaving silent relief behind him.

They sat like that for a while, how long exactly she didn’t know, but finally Geoff spoke. “Dibs on the shower.”

“Ladies first, Geoff.”

“You two go on ahead. I want to see Rio again before I go.” Reed’s voice was quiet and Heidi could hear the mix of guilt and pain the actress wore like a mantle.

“You’re not going to be any good to him if you don’t get some sleep.”

“I’m not going to be able to sleep. I’ll be by later.”

Geoff looked over at her and nodded, so Heidi stood up and rested a hand on one of Reed’s broad shoulders. *Shoulders that tried to hold more than was good for any one person to hold.* “We’ll be back with some lunch, okay?” Letting Reed know that they weren’t fooled, but would support her decision.

For the second time in less than ten minutes, Reed surprised her by laying a hand over hers and squeezing back. “Thanks. For everything.”

“What are friends for?” Then she and Geoff left, stopping to take a look in on Rio before making their way to an elevator. “She’s changed.”

“Ayup.” Geoff hit the down button.

“More open, and at the same time more ... not there. Vulnerable almost. Like she’s glued together by sheer will.”

“Worried?”

She nodded. “I’m worried about both of them.”

Reed watched Heidi and Geoff leave the small room—heard them pause outside the room where Rio lay sleeping, then continue down the corridor. When she could no longer hear the echo of their shoes on the polished hospital floors, she slumped forward and let the tears flow.

She didn't let herself cry long, afraid if she let go that she wouldn't get control back, and she needed to be in control. For Rio.

He had looked so tiny, most of his face hidden under the surgical tape that kept the respiration tubes and various instruments hooked securely in place. *I'm so sorry, sweetie.* "I wish I could just make it all go away." But she couldn't. Couldn't do any more to save her son than she had been able to do to save the rest of her family. *Or Will.* She was powerless and she hated it. Angry and exhausted, she stood, the pain in her leg nearly forcing her back onto the bench. "Got to get that looked at." It was getting worse, the pain growing more intense each time she forced the leg to bear her weight.

"Ms. Lewis?" The hesitant inquiry came from a friendly looking nurse in pale pink pastel scrubs.

One corner of her mind wondered for an instant why everyone always called her Ms. Lewis. Never Miss or Mrs., just Ms. *Or Bitch.* "Yes."

"We're taking your son over to the paediatric ward. You can come over with us if you'd like."

"Thanks." She took two steps forward, a sudden excruciating pain shooting through her hip and into her back, then hit the ground hard. Her head connected with the edge of a small coffee table and fresh pain exploded in her skull, then was gone as the darkness claimed her.

* * *

Are we even going to be able to pull this off? Jae settled in, adjusted the seatback and wiggled until she found a comfortable spot. Eyes closed, she tried not to think about what lay ahead. Not the next week, the next day or especially the next few minutes.

A yawn emerged from deep within her body. Jae gave into it fully, not bothering to stifle the reflex.

What are you going to say to her? Before or after I yell at her for taking off? she asked herself wryly. The responses would be different, and that's where the difficulty in this mess really was. With Reed, it seemed that she was almost constantly torn between what she ought to feel for the actress on a purely professional level, and what she felt for the woman as just plain Jae. It was something she'd been avoiding thinking

about too deeply, but focusing on her problems beat thinking about the impending take-off, so Jae let her mind tackle the issue.

Work had always been simple: a welcome respite from the tangle of her personal life and its trail of disastrous relationships, a place where her dreams flowed from paper across a giant screen into the subconscious of her audience. But now, it was complicated beyond belief.

There was no good reason for the course she had decided to set, no justifiable explanation for her evasions, half-truths and outright lies to Chambers. Nothing except a gut level feeling that this was right. The same feeling she'd had during a Christmas dinner more than twenty years ago. *I must be tired to be thinking about that again.*

The table had been crowded with various cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents along with more immediate family members. She'd been squeezed in between her cousin James and her sister, a situation that made it difficult for her as a left-hander to eat neatly, so she'd been quiet, trying not to draw her mother's attention.

They'd been waiting for everyone to finish picking at the large turkey, and her grandmother had asked James about school. Her cousin had looked panic-stricken, shooting a guilty look at his parents before responding that he was going but didn't really have a clue about what he was going to study.

"Nonsense, James. You just need to apply yourself. Engineering, law or medicine, that's where the future is," Uncle Robert had admonished.

"Oh leave the boy alone, Rob. Nobody knows what they want to do at his age. The whole world is open to them."

"I do." To this day Jae wasn't sure what had prompted her to speak up, but she'd looked over at her grandmother, and it had felt right, so she'd gone with it.

Uncle Robert had laughed.

"Hush, Robert. What are you going to be, Jae?" her grandmother had asked encouragingly.

For an instant, seeing everyone watching her, she'd almost backed out, afraid to disappoint them. "I'm going to make movies."

Her mother had looked horrified, and of the others, only her father and grandparents hadn't laughed.

"She wants to be an actress of all things," Aunt Helen had trilled, drawing fresh laughter.

"No." She still remembered thrusting her small jaw out defiantly, determined to make them understand. "I want to make movies."

"Ah, the lass wants t' be a director." Her grandfather's tone carried respect, and she could still hear the way he had said the word. It was the same way her Uncle Rob had said engineering or law.

She'd nodded, then looked down at her plate. When next she looked up, both of her grandparents were studying her, and she had tried to figure out what they were thinking.

"How do you know, Jacqueline?" James had asked with a mix of disbelief and condescension. "You're only eight. I'm ten years older and I still don't know."

She had thought about it for a minute, aware of the indulgently expectant looks from her family. "I just do. Because...." She'd struggled to find the words, unable, with her child's mind, to put a name to what she felt.

"Because it feels right," supplied her grandmother, exchanging looks with her father. "Well if you believe, then so do we."

Then Danielle had spilled her milk reaching for more squash and events had moved on, her announcement apparently forgotten. But it hadn't been. When her birthday had rolled around the following March, her grandparents had taken her aside. "There are two things that will take you farther in life than anything else. One is love, and the other is belief. Always believe in yourself. We do. Belief can make the impossible real, and love makes it worth it. Can you remember that?"

Solemnly, she'd nodded. "Yes." Though she really hadn't quite understood.

"Happy birthday, my girl." Her grandfather had kissed the top of her head as her grandmother had handed over an envelope.

"Thanks, Grandda. Thank you, Nan." The packet had ripped apart easily in her hand, a bankbook and a folded certificate inside.

"Belief is priceless, but money helps."

Jae let the memory trail off, fresh tears stinging her tired eyes. That's what it comes down to, isn't it? How much you believe. In yourself—and in her.

Except there wasn't a logical reason in the world why she should believe in Reed, nothing tangible on which to hang her hopes. Nothing, except gut instinct and faith. Belief.

And like her grandparents had with her, she'd believe enough for both of them. And the other? Jae let herself think seriously about the question, one she had been avoiding. The other will have to wait. I can't afford to deal with the emotional component of all this right now. It would be hard, work no longer a viable escape, but she'd manage somehow.

And what would be wrong with trying?

Failing. The belief part I can do. It's relationships I suck at. Not quite willing to admit it was more than a crush.

More settled in her mind now, Jae closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep, oblivious to the cramped seat or the crowded plane.

THIRTY-SIX

“Please. I have the right to say good-bye. Please.”

“The rules are quite clear—immediate family only. And the family has asked that you not be allowed in.”

“All I need is a minute ... please.” The man continued to plead, his arguments falling on deaf ears.

Reed sat up slightly. The commotion in the ER had awakened her, and she’d lain there for the past few minutes unintentionally listening to what was being said. Her head ached slightly, and when she flexed her right thigh, it throbbed painfully. The door to her room was open and various noises filtered through. Cart wheels skidded along the polished floor, the PA system made sporadic announcements, and from somewhere outside she thought she heard the sound of a construction crane.

“Please....” The voice was tired, ragged with fear and desperation, and Reed found herself feeling for the unknown man.

“I have things to do. Now excuse me.” The person she assumed was the nurse spoke tersely and, Reed thought, with unnecessary cruelty.

She could feel all too clearly what the stranger must be going through. To be that close to a loved one and not be allowed in to say good-bye was unthinkable. *If it were Rio....*

Tears stung at her eyes, and she swung her legs over the side of the bed. Nausea forced her back down and a soft grunt escaped as she fell against the pillow.

“Are you okay?”

Reed looked over, startled. It was the man whose voice she had heard arguing with the nurse. He couldn’t have been a day under sixty, but his face held the same child-like dazed confusion she’d seen on her son’s face when one of the farm animals had died despite Heidi’s best effort. “All things considered, yeah, I’m fine.” *Worried about my son, but fine.* “You?”

The man was twisting his fingers, and his face showed gray with exhaustion. “No.” His voice broke on the simple syllable and he looked up at her helplessly. “My ... we’ve been together thirty years ... and the kids, well.... It don’t mean a thing to them. I’m not family, never will be.” He shrugged again, and before she could reply he was gone.

A call buzzer was pinned neatly to the crisp white sheets to the left of her pillow, and she reached across, depressing the button. It was a long

five minutes before a nurse arrived, time enough to worry about Rio and to think about the man whose pain she could feel as if it were her own.

"Awake are we, Ms. Lewis?" It was the same nurse from the hallway, her officious tone hiding whatever bedside manner she might have had. Reed decided that she disliked the nurse on principle.

"Obviously." She adjusted her position so that the nurse wasn't looking down at her. "I need to check on a patient in the paediatric ICU."

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that until the doctor comes in to talk to you."

"Listen, you cold-hearted bitch. I'm not asking you to help me. I'm telling you to. Clear?"

"The doctor will be here shortly. You can take it up with him." The nurse made a note on her chart and left the room.

Reed let her eyes roam over the white walls with their shiny metal fixtures. Pleated curtains hung in front of what was, presumably, the large observation windows blocking light from both the hallway and the world beyond. The cloying smell of antiseptic completed the nearly claustrophobic effect. *I'm not waiting around in here.*

"Hey. You still out there?" Reed called out.

"Me?" The old man stuck his head back in the door. "She don't like you none either."

"Guess not. Listen, if you bring me a wheelchair, I can buy you five minutes worth of diversion."

Hope lit his pale eyes, and for the first time in a couple of days Reed felt good about what was happening. "You'd do that?"

"Being an actress has its useful moments. Now go on. Find me that chair."

He was back in a couple of minutes, pushing a battered hospital wheelchair. "How's this?"

"Well it won't win the Winston Cup, but it'll do." The best that could be said about the gray device was that all its wheels appeared to be accounted for. "Want to help me out of here?" She didn't trust herself to get up without keeling over, and the goal of this exercise was to end up in paediatrics, not on the floor. *Where in the hell are Heidi and Geoff? What? Have them show up and spoil the fun? C'mon, admit it—you're looking forward to sticking it to Ms. Unctuous. Yup.*

He ambled over to the bed, and thrust out a large hand. "Josiah Bennett at your service." He sketched a slight bow and kissed her knuckles gallantly.

“Reed Lewis. Shall we?” Together they managed to get her into the chair without pulling her leg. Settled in its narrow confines, she looked up at him. “Okay, here’s the plan. I’ll cause a ruckus in the hall. I can guarantee you that I’m not supposed to be out of bed so they’ll swarm all over me the instant I go out there. I’ll keep them busy while you say good-bye, then you have to come out and get caught so I can get out of here. It’s not long, but it’s the best I can do. Deal?”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” She disengaged the brake, and ran her palms over the smooth gray tires, getting a feel for the chair’s motion. “Better go out and get ready.”

She gave him thirty seconds, then wheeled herself out into the hall. The exertion made her head throb, which did nothing for her mood.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Nurse Unctuous materialized in front of the wheelchair.

“I heard NASCAR was looking for new drivers, thought I’d apply.” It was good to let the anger and frustration out, and she couldn’t think of a better target—or a better excuse to be confrontational.

“Are we going to cooperate, or do I need to call security and have you restrained?”

“Well, I’m not going to cooperate, so you figure it out.” An audience was beginning to gather, and even the nursing station clerk was focused on what was happening. *This is sort of fun.* She smiled up at the nurse, eager to see what would happen next. Out of the corner of her eye, Reed noticed Josiah slip into the room next to hers. *Stage one complete.*

“Just because you’re some fancy pants actress doesn’t mean you get to make the rules. This isn’t Hollywood.”

It was the perfect opening. “And just because you are supposed to enforce the rules, it doesn’t give you the right to be cruel. Frankly, your bedside manner sucks. You could have called ICU for me, and you could have let that man in to say good-bye.” Hatred sparked in the nurse’s eye, the intensity surprising Reed.

“Is there a problem here?” a man’s voice interjected, and she broke off her visual war with the nurse to look at the newcomer. A youngish man in a white lab coat was walking next to a couple around the same age. He said something to them and they peeled away. Into the same room, Josiah had entered.

“Oh shit,” Reed muttered under her breath, then spoke up. “Yes. There is.”

Without warning Josiah was flung into the hallway by the man who

had just entered the room.

“You fucking faggot scum!” Before anyone could stop him, he kicked at Josiah, continuing to scream obscenities. “Keep your perverted murdering hands off my father!”

Reed looked around, shocked. Everyone was frozen. “Do something!” she yelled, catapulting the doctor and several orderlies into action. The hall was full of screaming people. Quickly she rolled the chair out of the way and turned it in the direction of the elevator. As she did, Reed looked in the eyes of the woman who was standing in the hospital room door. It was a look of implacable hatred and giddy triumph.

That could be me. This time Reed knew the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach had nothing to do with the bump on her head. She didn’t want to believe that she would be that mean, but she knew otherwise. The elevator arrived and she maneuvered her way inside, away from the tragedy unfolding in the hallway.

Thick metal doors slid shut on the sounds of hate and pain, and the floor under her chair vibrated as she began her ascent. Reed got off on the third floor and slowly wheeled herself in the general direction of paediatrics. The dull ache in her head had begun to subside, and she felt better for the sleep the injury had inadvertently forced on her.

She rounded another corner and stopped, recognizing a hallway she’d already been down. “You, my dear, have the directional sense of a deaf bat in a labyrinth. On the bright side, if I don’t know where I am, then neither do they,” Reed muttered to herself and kept moving.

One thing was certain, she had to find her way before some conscientious nurse decided she was out of place or nuts. Reed smiled, laughing lightly. *That could work. It was even in the script. Well sort of—Kerry was the one stuck in the hospital, not Dar.* The thought sobered her for a moment as Jae and the movie came to mind. *I need to call her again.*

A swift scan of the surprisingly empty hallway was all she needed to locate a linen room. Furtively she looked around before rolling inside and closing the door. Reed quickly swapped her hospital gown for a clean set of pale blue scrubs. “Whatever happened to garden variety green?” She tied the drawstring on the pants, realizing as she did that she had a problem. No shoes. Her bare toes were winking up at her. “So much for plan Dar.” Without shoes, she couldn’t copy the way Dar had gotten Kerry out of the hospital. No one would buy a doctor with no shoes.

If I had my cell ... if I had my cell, I’d still be hooped. Dead cells don’t

make calls. Hell, if I had my cell, I'd have my shoes. Reed flopped back into the wheelchair, declaring, "Beam me up, Scotty."

A white box halfway up the wall to the left of the door caught her eye, giving her an idea, and she smiled. *Bingo. Plan B.* Reed cautiously exited the closet, eyes seeking a clue to her location. A hanging sign to her left indicated that she had found her way to 4A-West. Re-entering the room, she reached up and pressed the button marked 'all call,' made her announcement requesting Dr. Chappelle, then took up a post in the hallway. Reed tucked the chair into a window alcove that afforded her a clear view but allowed her to remain inconspicuous.

Outside she could see it was already gray and dark, but that didn't mean anything in New England during autumn. The incident in Emergency made her bet that it was around eleven, or maybe one in the afternoon—during visiting hours. *Which means I was out for a good while. Is that why the nurse wouldn't connect me with paediatrics?* Now that she had a minute to think, the uneasy scared feeling that had all but owned her the last couple of days returned full force. *Did something happen?* Something: a nebulous possibility that would see her son well again or not: an outcome to cherish or to fear, all unknowing of its reality.

"You rang?" Heidi had rounded a corner and was standing with one hand on her hip, the other waving in the air. "Why didn't you just stay put in ER?"

"How's Rio?"

"Fine. He's still unconscious, but they did an MRI instead of a CT, and everything looks as normal as can be expected. How's the head?" Her voice held a note of optimism.

"Still attached." She turned the chair so that Heidi could get at the handles. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

Heidi shook her head. "I don't think so. You are headed back to ER."

"No." But her friend persisted and finally she gave in. "Okay, fine. I bet Rio hates it when you look at him like that."

"He's smart enough to do what he's told. Head injuries are nothing to take lightly. Look, it won't take long."

* * *

"Won't take long, yeah right." Reed was sitting in a comfortable chair next to Rio's bed, leg elevated slightly. She'd spent three hours in ER exchanging the odd glaring look with Nurse Unctuous, who had apparently made it her personal mission to track and record every one

of the actress' movements.

At least she had her clothes back. They had been laundered while she waited, Heidi and Geoff having taken them to a dry cleaner that offered one-hour service. They had also picked up a new pair of pajamas for Rio, and when the nurse had come in to change his dressing the last time, they'd carefully put the soft flannel ones on in place of the hospital gown.

He could have been sleeping, his face peacefully composed, breathing evenly, his chest rising and falling on its own, no longer hooked to the respirator, though a GT tube remained securely in place. She picked the book up off the bed, leafing through the pages until she found her spot. "Conan turned to the gold and ivory altar indicated and took up a great round jewel, clear as crimson crystal; and he knew that this was the Heart of the Elephant."

"You know I'm surprised you even have to read those anymore."

Reed looked up. Heidi was leaning against the doorframe. "It's one I haven't read before. It was in the parents' room."

"Ah, a missed classic."

"You'd rather I read 'Goosebumps?' They had a Wishbone book—'Joan of Arc' I think."

"I kinda liked the 'Knights of the Shrieking Armour.'"

"You would."

"Ayup. Geoff and I are going back to the hotel. One of the nurses will bring a cot in for you in a little while."

"Thanks."

"No problem." Heidi walked over to the bed and stood quietly. The brunette's eyes were ringed with dark circles, worry telling its story clearly in the lines of her face. She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Night, sweetheart, see you in the morning." The words were meant to be optimistic, but came out thick and choked.

"Hey." Reed leaned forward. "You okay?" They hadn't really talked yet, all three of them skirting the seriousness of the situation. "No lies."

"This isn't good, Reed. I know what Zerafa says—that's partly his job—but the longer he stays like this, the less likely it is that he'll be okay. So, no, I'm not okay. I'm scared and worried. And it doesn't help that you went and banged yourself up, so that now I have two of you to worry about."

The words were like a shock of cold water, and she looked at Heidi, unsure of how to respond. She'd already suspected that things were more dicey with Rio than the staff was letting on. Hearing it out loud

only confirmed her fears.

Heidi sighed. "You still don't get it do you?"

"Get what?"

"Rio isn't the only honorary Chappelle. No matter what happens, you still have a place to come home to."

"I know."

"No, Reed, I don't think you do. Not everyone disappears, or hangs around because they want something."

Reed shrugged.

Heidi turned to face her. "And that's what scares me the most. That if we lose him, we'll lose you too." Tears ran down the vet's face. "So remember us, okay? We're all going to need each other to get through this."

"I'll try." It was easier to think of Heidi and her husband in terms of being there for Rio, safer. "It's just...."

"Hard. I know. But you can't live your life in fear of things that have already happened."

A change of subject was in order, and she cast around desperately for something to say. "Did Geoff have any luck getting my cell phone recharged?"

Heidi shook her head. "No. And I get the hint. End mushy moment. But that does remind me." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a plastic card. "Here's the phone card you asked for. It's good for local and long distance."

"Thanks. Can you stay with him for a minute while I go make a call?"

"Ayup. Two mysterious calls in one day. You didn't meet someone out there in LaLa land, did you?"

"It's not mysterious."

"Reed, everyone you talk to is here in this hospital. So it's a bona fide mystery."

"Only to the nosy. If you must know, I'm trying to reach someone back on the set." She could only imagine Heidi's reaction if the other woman knew the half of it.

"Unh hunh." Heidi settled into the recently vacated chair. "You still didn't answer the question."

"Yes I did." With that she wheeled herself out into the hallway and headed for the bank of pay phones next to the elevator. Reed dialed the familiar number and listened to it ring. A clicking noise on the line indicated the call had been picked up, but the beep followed by a canned voice revealed it to be the answering machine again, so once

more she hung up. "Next time, ask Jae for the fucking area code." The only number she knew completely was the office one, Jae having been the one to call every other time they'd spoken.

Reed wheeled back into the room and stopped at the doorway, holding back a laugh.

"The Cimmerian turned and fled from the chamber, down the silver stairs," Heidi read breathlessly.

"I thought you didn't like Conan?"

"Argh. Reed! Don't sneak up on people like that. And I don't—it's too gory."

"I edit the gore. And I wasn't sneaking." The brakes locked into position, and she gingerly switched from the wheelchair to the more comfortable one the nursing staff had provided.

"If you say so. What do you want for breakfast?"

"Hotcakes and sausage. And coffee. A big coffee."

"All right. See you in the morning."

"Night, Heidi." Then the other woman was gone and once more she was alone with her son. Reed adjusted his covers, and turned the light down a touch. The combination of hitting her head and reading for a couple of hours was making her eyes ache. "You know, I think I need glasses. Not terribly glamorous for an actress though hunh? What do you think? Should I get those big heavy frames that are all the rage right now? Or a pair of wire rimmed granny glasses? Or how about those pince-nez ones like in Matrix?"

She remembered the first night they'd gone to see it. The theatre owner had not been happy to have a seven-year-old in the audience on a Saturday night. It still brought a smile to her face. Rio had leaned over to the man behind the wicket, earnest-faced and polite. "May I please have two tickets for the nine o'clock showing of 'The Matrix?'"

"We don't let children in to see that one."

Rio had looked around, eyes meeting hers and quirked a small grin. "Oh no, sir, she's not a child, honest. I'll make sure she behaves, and I'll hold her hand during the scary parts."

They'd ended up seeing it three weeks in a row, the owner letting them in for free the last time.

"Matrix ones, like Neo."

She barely heard the ghost-like whisper, her head snapping around at the sound of the longed-for voice. A lump formed in her throat as she looked into the ice blue eyes that were the image of her own. Then the lids slid slowly shut and his face relaxed again. She quickly hit the

nurse's button.

"Hey, kiddo. Mummy's right here. C'mon, wake up again, please?" Gently she shook him, trying to get an indication that she hadn't just imagined it.

A nurse came into the room. "Is everything okay?"

"I was talking to him, then he woke up and spoke. He told me to get glasses like Neo's. His eyes were open and everything." Reed knew she was rambling in her relief. *He woke up.*

The nurse busied herself taking vitals and lifting Rio's eyelids, shining light into them much like the doctor in ER had with her earlier. One of Rio's arms moved, and the nurse stopped what she was doing. A broad grin split her careworn face. "I'll page the doctor."

"Is he going to be okay?"

"I can't tell you that for sure, but it looks promising. Young Riordan here is a fighter. The doctor will be able to tell us more."

Relief washed over her and she fought the need to giggle, sure that if she had been standing her legs would not have held her up. The nurse left and Reed forced her chair closer to the bed, taking one of Rio's smaller hands in both of hers. A snatch of a song from Orlando that had made her feel safe ran round in her head, and she began to sing, not quite on key, excitement making it difficult to hold the notes.

"Halfway down the stairs, is a stair where I sit. There isn't any other stair quite like it. I'm not at the bottom, I'm not at the top; so this is the stair where I always stop. Halfway up the stairs ..." she faltered, having not been awake to hear the rest of the song the other times it had been sung.

"Isn't up, and isn't down. It isn't in the nursery, it isn't in the town...."

The warm alto came from the doorway, and Reed slowly turned, not needing the evidence of her eyes to know who was singing.

"... and all sorts of funny thoughts, run 'round my head: 'It really isn't anywhere! It's someplace else instead!'"

THIRTY-SEVEN

“Oh shit.” Cait stared at the television screen in shock. This was not good. Not good at all.

“Hon?” Thom poked his head through the open counter that separated the kitchen from the living room.

She didn’t answer straight away, concentrating instead on what was being reported. “Hang on a sec.” Film footage mixed with commentary added strength to the broadcast, appearing to validate the rumours that had begun to fly over the airways. It looked like the standard fare they had been expecting.... Reed had had a fight with Jae, the two were more than colleagues, yada yada yada, drugs, collapse. Cait leaned forward and hit the volume control on the remote.

“... collapsed in a Maine hospital. Blood tests revealed that Ms. Lewis had more than four times the recommended dosage of a prescription painkiller in her bloodstream at the time of her collapse. Hospital sources confirm that she was admitted for treatment, then discharged at her own request after causing a disturbance in the ER. Eight years ago the actress, whom insiders refer to as the Amazon Ice Queen, walked off the set of another movie—one directed by the man originally slated to direct her current picture, a man who is now himself dead of a drug overdose.”

“Once more it looks like sex and drugs are the supporting cast in a Hollywood film.” The announcer turned slightly and the camera panned across the set, now focusing on a large screen.

Cait stared at the TV as the program cut to commercial. Jae would walk off her plane unaware that a storm had risen in her absence.

“Everything okay?” Thom dropped onto the couch, oven mitts still covering his hands.

“No. We have big problems.” The commercial break ended and this time Jae’s face filled the screen, flanked by pictures of other women, some of whom Cait recognized as Jae’s former lovers. “We were so worried about protecting Reed that we never even thought about how vulnerable Jae might be.”

Thom looked back at her, his face gone still and slightly pale. Suddenly the sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach grew. “I can’t talk to you about this, can I?”

“No.” He sounded as helpless as she felt.

So far they’d been lucky, their respective jobs not yet coming between

them. "This sucks," she said as she leaned against him, needing the physical comfort if she couldn't have the verbal.

"Yup. But it's not like we didn't know this might happen."

"It still sucks." On the TV, more innuendo about Jae and speculation about her sexuality filled the screen. If it didn't have the potential to hurt her friend so badly, Cait would have laughed at some of the rumours.

"She didn't really sleep with Melissa Etheridge, did she?"

"Are you going to print the answer if I tell you?"

"Probably."

"Then no. She didn't. She's never met Anne Heche, thought the coming out season on Ellen was wasted, Sigourney Weaver has never ever asked for her phone number, but she will probably admit to small crushes on Amy Ray and Emily Saliers."

"Sigourney Weaver ever ask for your phone number?"

"No. Bette Midler did once, though."

"Was that before or after you rear-ended her?"

Cait burst out laughing. "After." She sobered up and looked at her fiancé. "Is this going to get you in trouble?"

"No." He took off the oven mitts and dropped them onto the coffee table, then drew her close with one arm. "Because I don't know anything, and I assigned a staff-writer to the movie after we did the interview with Dr. Chappelle."

"Guess it's time to set some ground rules, huh?"

"No lying to me. A 'no comment' or an 'I can't talk about it' will be enough for me. You can lie to any other reporter you want. Just not to me."

"Okay. Now what about just between us?"

"That's a tough one. I can see you're upset by what's on the show, and I want to make it all go away, but...."

"But you can't. You can hold me, though. How about, while this is going on, we let actions speak louder than words?"

Thom grinned and dipped his head. "Deal." Warm lips covered hers and she surrendered to the reassuring kiss, letting her hands roam idly across his broad chest. "I love you."

"Love you too. Now beat it to the back bedroom. I have some calls to make."

Laughing, he got up off the sofa.

An hour later, she meandered out across the living room floor and dug out her cell phone, scrolling through the numbers in the phone book

until she found the one she wanted. There was no point in calling Jae just yet; the director was still on the airplane, her flight not due to arrive in Bangor until just after eleven p.m. Eastern time.

The smell of pine furniture mixed with the subtle aroma of the basil Thom had been cooking with, drifting around the large apartment and filling it with a pleasantly homey atmosphere. She loved it here; the decor was simple—solid, warm and real—made to be lounged in. *Not unlike Thom*. The happy glow, inspired by his low-key invitation to move in, suffused her with a warmth that nestled deep inside, holding her against the storm about to break over all of them.

She dialed the number and waited.

“Cavanaugh residence, Aine speaking.”

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?”

“No,” came the indignant response, “and Aunt Jae’s not here.”

“I know, sweetie. Is your grandmother around?”

“Yes. I’ll get her.”

Cait held the phone away from her ear, all too familiar with just how loud Jae’s niece could get.

“Hello.” Elizabeth’s voice was a richer version of her daughter’s, both of them stressing syllables identically.

“Hello, it’s Caitlynn.”

“Has something happened? Is Jacqueline okay?”

“She’s fine. But the media is about to drag her name through the mud in its quest for ratings. They’re outing her, among other things.”

“What do you need us to do?”

Cait wondered if Jae really had any idea just how much her parents were behind her, or if her friend’s running battles with her mother had more to do with an imagined need to rebel than actual fact. *On the other hand, that could be exactly where Jae gets her intimacy problems from. Monkey see, monkey do.* “Be on the lookout for reporters. They’ll want as lurid a picture as possible. To them, it’s all fair game.”

“You can’t keep the family out of it? Not all of them will understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand. We are on a ‘deny everything’ policy right now. Get them to tell baby Jae stories, or about how she’s always wanted to make movies. Nothing else.”

“Can’t Thom do anything about this?”

Here it was, the first time the question would be asked, but not the last. How she answered would be crucial to how mutual friends would look at him. “Thom needs to be able to do his job, without any pressure from us. But ... I wouldn’t be adverse to you talking to the Times if they

come knocking.” His ethics would guarantee a balanced story, so if they talked to anyone, better the Times than anyone else.

“How is she taking this?” Concern was clear in the older woman’s voice.

“She doesn’t know. I’ll call her later, she’s still en route to Maine.”

“We’ll do what we can, dear.”

“I know. Call me if anything comes up or it gets too much.”

“Brian and I will handle them, don’t you worry. No one smears our Jacqueline.”

Cait didn’t doubt it in the least. Elizabeth Cavanaugh was a formidable woman, no mistaking that. And no mistaking just where Jae had gotten her drive. “Thanks.” She rang off and leaned her head back against the cushions of the sofa. “You can come out now.”

Thom came out of the bedroom and plopped down next to her. She swung her legs up onto the couch, letting her head fall into his lap. Together they watched the last rays of the sun dip below the horizon as darkness fell on the tender night.

“Everything set?”

“Hmm. Yes. Everyone’s been alerted, looks like they’ll stand behind her.”

“Good. She’s my friend too.”

“I know.” She twisted and looked up, holding his eyes with her own. “She knows that.” She settled in again, enjoying the last quiet moments of peace they were likely to get for awhile. *Yeah, everyone will stand behind her all right—everyone but the person who got her into this mess.*

THIRTY-EIGHT

Everything that she had wanted to say was gone, swept away by the sight of the small body in linen, and the sound of his mother's voice. When Reed faltered, she didn't hesitate, but picked up the lyrics she had been unconsciously singing along with. She nearly lost the thread as Reed pivoted and they came face to face. Words failed her as the song ended, swallowed by the clear blue pools that were the only points of colour on the actress' pale face.

Silence invaded the space between them, and for a second Jae nearly turned and bolted from the room, unable to deal with the sudden upwelling of emotion evoked by the pain and fatigue so clearly set on Reed's features. And she would have, except for the barest glimpse of disbelief mixed with joy that had flashed in the eyes still holding hers.

"He woke up." Reed's voice cut the stillness, breaking the spell.

Jae was totally unprepared for the profound relief that hit, hands flying to her mouth, smiling through the tears. Without thinking, she stepped into the room, toward Reed, then faltered as she realized that the actress might not want to be touched. Tears were running down Reed's cheeks, and Jae felt helpless. "I don't think I have a section in the friendship rule book for this," Jae said.

"Are we?"

"Friends?"

"Yes."

"I don't know." Jae could see Reed flinch away from her honesty. "I'd very much like to be," Jae added.

Someone brushed by, ending the nascent conversation. A tall, older man in a neatly pressed blue shirt and tan pants was standing by Rio's bed. Jae turned to go, intending to give Reed and the doctor some privacy.

"Stay. Please?"

Jae nodded and moved to stand behind the chair to Reed's left.

"Let's see if we can wake this young fellow up again, shall we?" The doctor produced a small bulb with a tapered spout. He squeezed it over the sleeping boy's eyelid's, moving the dark bangs slightly as air rushed across Rio's face.

"He spoke." Reed repeated the words over again, like a mantra.

The doctor looked over, one eyebrow raised questioningly. "Was he coherent?"

"I'd been asking him what kind of glasses I should get. Rio told me to get glasses like Neo's."

Jae put one hand on Reed's shoulder and squeezed gently, silently acknowledging the victory before letting her hand drop away. The gesture had been unconscious, completed before she could examine the wisdom of touching the actress, but Reed hadn't flinched this time.

"Excellent." The doctor continued to puff air across Rio's cheeks, this time adding a streak of water from a nearby water glass, before blowing again.

There was a small motion from the bed, then another, as Rio started to awaken. His thick lashes began to flutter, and his head turned slightly as he tried to avoid the stimulus that was dragging him from a deep slumber. Jae watched as he drifted up through the layers, approaching consciousness. She remembered watching Reed sleep and how the angularity of the actress' face had smoothed. It had made her appear much as her son did now.

"C'mon, kiddo."

"That's the way, Riordan. You've got someone here anxious to see your baby blues." As he spoke, the doctor elevated the bed, further disturbing Rio's sleep, still trying to ease him into wakefulness.

Jae watched as Reed tensed, and once more laid her hand across the actress' shoulder, this time leaving it there. With the tips of her first two fingers, she made small circles over the rigid muscles, not speaking with words.

The figure on the bed stirred again, his face losing the serenity of sleep as the corners of his mouth twitched.

"Who loves you?" The wistful hope in Reed's voice nearly cut Jae, and she felt tears sting at her eyes.

"Mummy does." The words were mumbled and indistinct, but it was clear that Rio was aware of what was going on around him.

"And don't you forget it." Reed's voice was stronger now and she leaned forward, one hand brushing the hair back from Rio's face.

"Mummy?" His eyes were wide open now, a deep shade of blue that drank in the surrounding light.

"Yeah, kiddo?"

"I'm hungry."

There was a moment of silence, and then laughter erupted in the room while Riordan looked on in confusion.

Reed moved forward and tried to stand, her motion awkward. Jae stepped around the chair and slid her arm under Reed's and lifted,

assisting the actress to stand and move over to the bed. As soon as she got close enough, Rio threw his arms around his mother. A lump formed in Jae's throat as she watched them rock together, one of the actress' strong hands tangled in Rio's curls as he was being cuddled.

"Hungry, hunh?"

"Yep," he said happily, head cradled on his mother's shoulder. "Can I have some Froot Loops?"

"*Eennntt.*" Reed made a sound like a buzzer. "I don't think so."

"Well young man, we can get you some Jell-O or a Popsicle tonight, but anything more substantial will need to wait until we see how you're feeling in a bit." The doctor efficiently moved around to the other side of the bed, and put a thermometer in Rio's ear. It beeped within seconds and the smile on the doctor's face grew. "Are you a cherry or a grape type?"

"Can I have green Jell-O please, Doctor Zerafa?"

"Green Jell-O it is."

Jae looked on the scene with interest as more notes were made on the chart and Reed exchanged looks with the doctor over Rio's head. No words were spoken as Reed edged away from the center of the bed and eased her son back onto the pillow.

"Mum needs to open your shirt up so the doctor can have a listen to your chest."

There was a slight hesitation over the last word, and Jae found herself tensing up along with Reed. For the first time he looked directly in her direction, then quickly buried his face against his mother and she couldn't help but laugh. "How 'bout if I turn my back?"

Reed whispered something in his ear and he giggled. "Really?"

"Honest."

"Cool." He leaned forward. "You don't have to turn around."

The doctor peeled the left-hand panel of the airplane-patterned top away and visually inspected the bandage before placing the stethoscope over its center. He listened for a few moments then, one-handed, removed them from his ears. "Reed, can I get you to gently lean him forward, careful not to let him bend at the stomach." He touched the exact place he meant, just under the ribcage.

Rio co-operated with the patience of one long familiar with being routinely examined, and in a few minutes was once again leaning back against his mother, one finger creeping close to his mouth. The air had grown expectant as they waited to hear what the doctor had to say.

Jae could read the fear in Reed's eyes as she waited for Dr. Zerafa to

finish making notes. "I'm going to order you a double helping of Jell-O, and while we're waiting for it, I need to talk to your mom for a minute."

Reed started to get up, and Jae moved to steady her. Rio twisted suddenly, small arms wrapped around his mother's waist.

"No. Don't leave, mummy." His cheeks were wet with tears and his face ashen.

"Shhh, it's okay. I'm not going anywhere. I'll just be right outside the door, okay?"

"Promise?" There was a slight quaver in his voice, and tears were still flowing down his cheeks.

"I promise." Reed kissed the top of his head then looked up.

Jae met her eyes and nodded assent, instantly understanding what she was being asked.

"Jae's going to stay in here. She'll get me if you need anything." As she spoke she tucked the covers around his waist, neatly folding back the topsheet, then placed a kiss on his forehead. "No jumping on the bed."

He giggled. "Aww."

Dr. Zerafa had brought the wheelchair around, and Reed eased into it. Rio's eyes widened and grew luminous, curiosity lighting his whole face.

"Can I ride in that?"

"We'll see."

"Cool." He lay back again, a yawn stealing the alert look he had been wearing. "Mum?"

"Hmm?" Reed paused on her way out the door.

"Who loves you?"

"Rio does."

"And don't you forget it."

In that instant Jae knew that if it came to a choice between supporting Reed's need to be with her son and finishing the film, it was no contest. *Not even close.*

* * *

Nervously, Reed watched the doctor walk away in pursuit of Jell-O and a sedative. The prognosis was guarded but hopeful, and Rio's condition would be upgraded once again, this time from serious to stable. There would be more of the seemingly endless rounds of tests in the morning, and then a decision about whether to operate again now, or later. But for now, for now, she had to focus on the positive aspects and let go of

the paralyzing fear driven by the uncertainty.

Every muscle along her back and shoulders ached, her stomach was twisted in knots, and she knew that she was inches from emotional overload. *Why had Jae come?* She also knew that the two most important people in her life waited within the tiny walls of Rio's hospital room. *Or at least if I face her.* It would be easy not to take that risk. To just go back in and brush Jae off. Safer too.

But Jae had taken the first step. *Can I do any less?* And so she turned and rolled into the doorway. Riordan was paying rapt attention to Jae as the director described filming an action scene. Reed stopped, equally fascinated as Jae enthusiastically sketched out camera angles with her hands, voice vibrant and excited, passion plain to see. The words held no evidence of the condescension so common when adults tried to explain things to children, the explanation peppered with technical terms like "soft-light" and "track in."

Jae's excitement proved contagious, and Rio's hands were also moving animatedly as he sketched a question of his own, punctuating the words with gestures. Not really listening, she caught only a word or two—"Mystic Knights" from Rio and "blue screen" from Jae. Instead she found herself watching their body language, eyes lingering longer and longer on the director.

So many of the things that drew her to Jae were playing out in front of her eyes. And a new one had been added. The polite interaction of Rio's cyber-introduction to the director had given way to what looked to be genuine liking, sparked by a shared interest.

When Rio yawned for the third time, and Jae for the second, Reed reluctantly broke off studying the two of them and moved all the way into the room.

"Mum!"

She smiled back, drinking in the width of Rio's smile. *Such a simple thing....* And yet something she'd been afraid of not seeing again.

He peered around her, looking hopefully at the door, face transparent in its quest.

Reed laughed, "Jell-O will be here in a minute or two, kiddo."

On cue, two nurses came through the door. One bore a tray with covered bowls littering its surface; the other pushed a folded up cot into the room, then left.

The nurse with the tray placed it on the high bed table and wheeled it within Rio's reach. "I believe this is for you." Then she turned and looked at Jae, expression apologetic rather than adversarial. "I'm sorry,

but visiting hours are over.”

A flash of disappointment sparked in the director’s eyes, and Reed watched her thoughtfully.

The doctor, who had entered on the heels of the nursing staff, spoke up. “It’s all right, Carol. Since the odds of getting Ms. Lewis here to go and get some sleep in a real bed are slim to none, she might as well have some company.”

Jae looked back at her, as though to gauge her reaction. *No time like the present.* Reed nodded back almost imperceptibly, receiving in turn, a smile.

“Mum. My arm hurts.” Some of the joy that had been coursing through her for the last half an hour fled at the sudden reminder of the fragility of the cord that bound Rio to recovery. His face was wan, the colour blanched by the pain, his eyes now dull.

In a panic, she swiveled her head to check in with Doctor Zerafa, who had moved quickly to Rio’s side. He met her worried gaze with a reassuring one. “It’s just a combination of the inactivity and the sutures. The adrenaline from waking up has worn off—perfectly normal.” He leaned down and captured a jiggling square of Jell-O on the spoon and deftly guided it to Rio’s mouth.

Reed came alongside and took over feeding her son. “Prepare shuttle bay doors for landing.” *Now where did that come from?* They hadn’t played that game in a long time, Rio declaring defiantly one morning that he was no longer a baby.

“Shuttle bay doors open.”

Tears stung her eyes and she fought them down, not to hide them from her audience, but from Rio. A couple of spoonfuls later he shook his head, and she let the utensil drop into the nearly empty cup. The sedative had taken effect, and his eyes drooped shut as he fought to stay awake. “Don’t fight it, sweetheart. Your body needs the rest.”

“Stay?” he mumbled, eyes closed.

“Night. I’ll be right here when you wake up.” There was no response, but a tiny smile decorated his pale lips before sleep smoothed even that away.

“He’ll be fine until morning, Reed. You really should consider getting some rest, or at least a decent meal and a shower.”

“I got some rest.”

“No, Reed, you got knocked senseless. Not quite the same thing.”

“Hold on. Back up. What’s he talking about?” Jae asked.

Reed shot the doctor a withering stare. “Thanks.”

“Don’t get mad at him. You had to know that sooner or later I was going to ask about the wheelchair and the hospital bracelet on your arm.”

“Well now, I don’t think you ladies need me for anything else. Reed, there’s a pair of crutches at the nursing station, should you choose to do the sensible thing or at least go eat.” With that, he was gone.

Uncomfortable, Reed looked down at her hands, aware that she and Jae were going to have to talk, and that the outcome was by no means certain.

“Do I unnerve you that much?” Jae’s voice was quiet, immeasurable sadness in the question, and the assumption behind it.

“Not you. This.” Reed gestured with one hand, a broad sweeping motion that encompassed everything. *How do I explain?* She wasn’t sure what she meant herself.

“Ah.” Jae nodded, seeming to understand.

“We can’t talk here.” The words broke into the silent impasse, harsh even to her own ears.

The director started to speak, then paused before finally asking, “Do you want to? Talk, I mean. Or, do we leave it, and go on from here, if not as friends, then at least not as enemies either?”

This was it. She could choose right now, with her next words, the future—choose whether it would include Jae or move on. It seemed as though the next moments passed in a hundred years, as she struggled to find the right way to begin mending the rift that she had caused between them. In the end she said the only thing that came to mind. “Talk.”

* * *

Jae could feel her heart nearly stop as the single syllable fell into the stillness that had sprung up. She’d taken a chance, pushing Reed, laying the choices out bluntly in a way she hadn’t done before.

Does Reed understand how scary this is for me? On some level, Jae was aware that this marked the beginning of something new and different, something out of her experience. Aware that the cost of this conversation might well be a piece of her soul. *Ironic that I’m willing to risk more for simple friendship, than I ever have on love.*

Then she met Reed’s eyes and saw a fear matching her own, a risk of equal proportion. In that instant she took a concrete step toward refashioning the bond that, contrary to all of the obstacles, continued to

draw her inexorably to the actress.

Everything looked like she was viewing it through a Vaseline lens, people and objects softened and distorted by an invisible film smeared across her mind's eye. Then time regained its regular tempo and her vision cleared; the room and Reed came into sharp focus as she in turn spoke. "I'll drive."

The slight dip of Reed's jaw was all the acknowledgement she received, but it might as well have been semaphore, so clearly did the gesture communicate trust.

A gentle kiss was placed on Rio's forehead, and his curls once more swept away from his brow. Reed pulled off the blue Navy sweatshirt and tucked it alongside her son, who curled a small fist around it.

"It's cold outside."

Reed shrugged and rolled forward. "I'm the Ice Queen, remember?"

It had been a joke of sorts between them, only now it didn't seem so funny to Jae. She stepped in front of the actress, one hand on each of the wheelchair's arms. "No. You may be many things Reed, but an Ice Queen isn't one of them. Not to Rio and not to me."

Wonder and tears showed in the blue plains. "How can you, of all people, still not see it?"

"No, how could I, of all people, still see it?" Jae rejoined. "C'mon. Let's get out of here before I start to cry." The wounds they carried were only just below the surface, and if the top got peeled away before they were someplace safe, someplace where they were free to talk and cry, Jae was afraid that the things that needed to be said would die unuttered.

THIRTY-NINE

If anyone had asked her later how they had gotten from paediatrics to the car, she wouldn't have been able to tell them; all of her energy had been focused on what was to come. The only evidence she had for having made the trip at all was the fact they were sitting in the rental car, waiting for the light to go green.

"Jae?"

"Yes?"

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. My hotel is over there, and we keep passing a Denny's, but I wasn't sure if either of those places is appropriate."

Reed raised a brow, a flash of the sardonic humour Jae loved showing clearly on her face. "Right, and I'm safer in a tiny car than in a big hotel room? Besides, I seem to remember you telling me that you'd never ever forced yourself on a woman—that changed suddenly?"

"No. That hasn't changed." Out of the corner of her eye, she observed the actress, who had turned to face the window. Instead of hiding her expression from Jae, it had the opposite effect. The darkened glass reflected the chiseled ridges of Reed's cheekbones, the harsh glare of passing streetlights shading the hollows in a monochromatic symphony that lent an almost ethereal quality to her features.

What's going on behind those eyes, Reed? Continuing to study the actress' body language for hints and clues, Jae nearly missed the turnoff to the hotel.

It was a dance, really. There was no music, no movement, yet they were carefully finding the rhythm of the conversation. Occasionally it had bursts of sound, a flurry of exchanges, then quieted again. The lead shifted too, as each tried to follow without getting lost—or burned. The flow dictated she speak next, this time about something inconsequential—a breathing space in the melody.

"So what happened that got you a hospital bracelet of your very own?" *Okay, so it's not totally inconsequential—but close enough.*

"I fell." Reed turned away again. Jae saw her take a deep breath, then turn back. "I didn't stay off my leg and it gave out this morning. An end table generously broke my fall."

"How is it?"

"My head hurts like hell, and my leg doesn't feel much better. Doctor said to stay off it for a couple of days, then go easy for a couple of

weeks. I strained something called a middle quadriceps of the thigh muscle.”

“And your head?”

“Garden variety bump on the head, no concussion.”

“Good. Concussions suck.” Jae pulled up to the turn around in front of the hotel. A uniformed porter came out to meet them, his collar turned up against the late October chill. “We’ll be leaving again around four, okay?”

“Ayup. If you ring down a bit o’head of when you want to go, we’ll bring ’er along for you.”

“Thanks.” She slipped him a generous tip, shivering in sympathy at the porous polyester jacket he wore. The crutches were in the backseat, and she grabbed them before moving around to open Reed’s door.

The actress’ white t-shirt clung to her body, pinned against her frame by the wind, nearly making Jae’s teeth chatter. Reed, though, seemed oblivious to the fact Jae was cold on her behalf and slowly climbed out of the car.

* * *

There was something about approaching an event by walking down a long corridor, and Reed suddenly understood why it was such an effective technique for building anticipation in filmmaking. Jae opened the stout room door, holding it wide to allow her to maneuver through with the crutches.

“Moving?” Several bags were piled in the center of the floor space at the foot of the two queen-sized beds. Only the black Samsonite guitar case had been spared haphazard storage.

Jae hastily cleared the bags to one side. “Actually, half of this is yours.”

“Mine?” Now that she peered a little more closely at the jumble of luggage, Reed was able to discern the familiar outlines of two of her own suitcases.

“I packed your stuff up and brought it with me.”

“Oh.”

“I figured, either way, you might want it.”

“Oh.” Reed knew she was repeating herself in an effort to buy time. Something in the short exchange had altered the atmosphere, and tension filled the place where a truce had reigned only moments before.

The normally hyperactive Jae had gone preternaturally still, black

satchel clutched in one hand, not even daring, it seemed, to breath into the fragile peace.

Terrified, Reed let her eyes roam the room, drinking in irrelevant details to keep from having to break the terrible silence or answer the questions she was sure to find in Jae's eyes. Velvet curtains hung from ornate bronze rods, the curves of the end caps reminiscent of an age long departed. The headboards were carved, detailed vine and leaf patterns growing along the cherry wood. A small crack ran up the cream wall, perversely appearing to spring from the hidden roots of the plant.

And still there was silence.

Everything had closed in around her, a bizarre optical illusion the opposite of what she normally experienced when under stress. Instead of the world receding and growing small as she distanced herself from the situation, it had grown—Carroll-like—distorted and overwhelming. *I need to get out of here.* The words sounded in her head, leaving her unaware that she had spoken them aloud.

"No."

Startled, Reed swung around to look at Jae. "What?"

"No running. It's not fair when you do that. If we are going to do this, I need to know that you won't just storm out if it gets difficult."

"I'll try."

"Not good enough." Jae took a breath, breaking into sudden motion as she moved across the room. "If you need a break, say so. But don't just cut and run."

It had started. The rules of engagement were being negotiated. She knew her own limits though and made a counter-proposal. "If I leave, I promise to come back within fifteen minutes."

"Why leave at all? It's manipulative—I end up not saying things I know I should say because I'm afraid you'll walk out."

Her legs and arms ached, and she let her weight fall onto the bed, a cover for the soft exhalation of pain, not all of it physical. *Is that what it looks like?* The crutches clattered against each other as they dropped, before being muffled by the deep pile rug. "That's not why. I leave because I'm afraid I'll say or do something to make it worse, not as a power thing." *No, you leave because you're scared to be jolted out of your little cocoon.* Reed pushed the voice away, concentrating on Jae instead.

Only the dark emerald of Jae's eyes gave her features any colour. Even the normally vibrant blonde of her hair seemed washed out and pale. "So will you stay?"

"Yes." It seemed barely a whisper, so she repeated herself, unsure if

she'd actually spoken or merely replied mentally. "Yes." As her answer fell into the space between them, the room seemed to regain more normal proportions, the first hurdle having been navigated successfully.

Jae seated herself on the other bed, then got up and dropped into a wing-backed chair that guarded the window, facing into the room.

"So what did you want to say?"

This time it was Jae who looked caught off balance. "Huh?"

Reed measured her words carefully, forcing them to sound unconcerned, not revealing what was at stake in the asking. "You said that there were things you wanted to say, but didn't."

Jae turned her head and looked at the curtains a moment before again meeting her eyes and taking a deep breath. "Okay." But no words followed immediately.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I think the biggest thing I want to tell you is how mad I am. Or not mad, really. Hurt." Jae was facing forward, head canted to one side, strangely with both eyes closed. "Mad and hurt. I deserved better. Deserve better."

Jae was looking at Reed now, expectantly she thought, and Reed found to her surprise that the anger she had thought burned away was back. "You deserved better? You? I deserved not to be fucking lied to, used."

There was no turning back now. The impasse shattered irretrievably, and there was no way left to pretend everything was okay.

"I never used you. Never. Don't lay Roan's crimes on me."

Reed recoiled as though slapped. Defensively, she moved to the attack, zeroing in on the part left unsaid, but instead of sounding angry, her tone of voice betrayed the sadness she hadn't admitted feeling, even to herself. "But you lied."

"No. I just didn't tell you soon enough. It's not the same thing."

"You're playing semantics, Jae." Half of her wanted to get up and walk out the door, while the rest of her desperately wanted to be given a reason she could understand. *What? One that absolves you of the blame?*

"Am I?" Jae's fierce eyes were turned in her direction, orbs bright with a glistening in the corner.

"You should have told me."

"Okay. I'll buy that. When? When should I have told you?"

"Right from the beginning."

"Why? You never told me you were straight. And quite frankly, who I sleep with is between me and the person I may be sleeping with."

"You were sleeping with me." *Is this really how you want to play this?*

Point, counterpoint, hurt, more hurt? Reed held up a hand to forestall Jae's reply. "Let me explain ... please?"

Jae nodded, and turned her body so they were facing.

How do I explain? How much do I explain? Reed chose her tack carefully, tasting each word before releasing it. "In the beginning, you're right—we weren't friends, and maybe I didn't need to know."

"Reed, in the beginning you were a raging homophobe."

"Are you going to let me talk?"

"Yes. Sorry."

"No interruptions?"

Jae made a zipping motion across her mouth and tossed over the imaginary key, which reflexively Reed pantomimed catching. In two seconds the entire tone and mood had changed, the tension that had crackled in the air discharged. The unexpected flash of humour brought with it hope, and a vivid reminder of what was to be gained if she were willing to take the risk.

It wasn't that it had suddenly gotten any easier. It just wasn't as daunting, and the words seemed to come naturally, habit of half a lifetime broken. "I know you took blame that belonged to Roan." *And to others ...* but Reed didn't speak of them. There were some memories too bitter to taste, even for friendship. "For that, I'm sorry. It wasn't fair. But I should have been told, especially after Orlando."

Reed stopped speaking, taking the time to sift through her feelings and the conclusions she had come to on her own in the dead of long, lonely nights. "Maybe I wouldn't have understood, and I might have walked away." A wry grin touched her lips. "I'd like to think I wouldn't have treated you any worse than I did Holly."

You're temporizing. "Okay, so I might have called you a few names and stopped talking to you. We'll never know. How do I explain this? You had all the information. You knew you were gay. You knew that I would have problems with that. You had all the cards. I trusted you. Then suddenly it was Roan all over again—only worse. All he got was my body." Reed left the rest of it unsaid, letting the implication hang in the air between them. *You had everything.* "It hurt."

No matter how hard she thought about it, no matter how she apportioned the fault—and as long as she was being honest with herself—neither of them was in the right, and both of them were wrong.

At a loss for what to say next, Reed gestured futilely with her hands and stopped talking.

Jae waited, silent, keeping her promise to listen. When the silence had

stretched out several minutes, she spoke into the space between them, “I started to tell you once, but we got interrupted, and before I got another chance ... you knew.”

She didn’t duck away from the scrutiny and unflinchingly met Reed’s eyes. *What do you hope to see? What do I want you to see?* It was one thing for the actress to see the truth in her words, quite another to have the truth behind them discovered.

Reed blinked, lowering her gaze. The abrupt release was like a shock, and it took a minute before Jae was able to regain her bearings.

Jae couldn’t sit still any longer and got out of the chair, her quick stride devoured the distance to the window. A gap in the curtains gave her a chance to fiddle with them. “Truth is, I was scared.”

Reed stared at her again, quirking an eyebrow. “Why did you climb my balcony?”

What did that have to do with it? Jae leaned back against the desk, one hand to either side, elbows crooked, gently supporting her weight. “There was no one else. I had to.” As soon as she heard the words, she understood. The understanding must have shown in her eyes, because a sad smile tugged at Reed’s lips.

FORTY

Reed listened, bemused, to the sounds emanating from the other side of the cream plaster wall. Jae had literally ricocheted off the bed and into the bathroom. Glass clinked against porcelain; water sloshed a fluid melody as it filled the carafe.

Any second now.... On cue the clunk of mugs being moved across the counter drifted out into the main room, borne on the caffeine zephyr.

Her eyes roamed over to the pile of luggage. Jae's earlier words came to mind, pricking at her. *Either way, I thought you might want it.* Reed stared at a spot on the wall just above Jae's suitcases, tracing the filigree pattern of cracks and bumps. Mentally she ticked through the calendar. *It's Friday, no Saturday.* The time changes and lack of regular sleep added to the difficulty of tracking the passage of time. *Saturday, they—we—were supposed to fly to Miami today.*

Is that why she came? Reed tried to puzzle it out. So far Jae hadn't said a single thing about the film, or about her disappearing act. *Either way.*

Balancing carefully against a chair, Reed removed the tiny ampoule of Irish Cream from the fridge and then, as an afterthought, the Jack Daniel's. On the surface it could be any one of the many nights they had stayed up talking in Orlando. All that was missing was a bag of cookies or a tube of Pringles.

"Should you be drinking that?" Jae was standing next to the wing-backed chair, twin mugs of coffee in one hand, coffeepot in the other.

"No." The top twisted easily in her hand and she resisted the impulse to skip the coffee altogether. Putting it aside, she opened the Baileys for Jae and exchanged it for one of the mugs. "Thanks."

"De nada."

What just a few minutes ago had seemed like a pleasant interlude, became for Reed an agonizing wait for the proverbial other shoe to drop. Jae had wandered over to the window and was pacing back along the far wall. "For Christ's sake, Jae, will you just sit already!"

Jae dropped like a stone into the wing-backed chair.

Reed studied the mix of hurt and chagrin on the director's face and deliberately gentled her voice. "I shouldn't have yelled, and I know that it helps you think, but you were beginning to make me dizzy."

"Sorry."

"Look, I'll stay in the room no matter what happens, if you can stay within a three foot radius."

"Three feet, hunh?" Jae asked with a smile.

Reed smiled back. "Yup." She took a sip of the coffee, enjoying the mix of flavours. *Whadda ya know, I handled that right after all.*

"It's funny, isn't it? I move around when I get worried or scared, you go completely still or drift off into outer space."

"That would be a funny odd not a funny ha-ha, I assume?"

"You'd rather we yelled?"

Jae looked at her strangely, as though making a decision. "It wouldn't be the first relationship I had that involved yelling. I had one girlfriend who thought that the tinkling of breaking plates made a nice counterpoint to the sound of her voice." She grinned wryly. "It didn't."

There it was. Jae's homosexuality was on the table in a way it hadn't been before. Even with Holly, it had been a fact that stayed in the background, never really talked about. *I can deal with this.* "I suppose that's a hazard in a relationship that has twice the estrogen floating around."

"You have no idea. I did okay until she came at me with a wine bottle, then I was out of there. Homey don't do domestic violence." The director set the empty coffee cup aside and slung one leg casually over one arm of the chair. You could, it would seem, move a lot and still stay in one place.

"Good. You deserve better." And she meant it. *Yeah, change the equipment and you'd snap her up in an instant.*

There was more shifting in the chair, and Jae looked at her for a long moment before speaking. "Can I ask you a question?"

Reed laughed, not to mitigate the seriousness, but in recognition of the ritual. "Sure, but then I get one back." She'd expected a laugh, or at the very least a small smile, but Jae looked even more somber. The coffee suddenly felt like mud, sitting heavily in her stomach, and she licked her lips unconsciously, waiting to hear the question.

"Why'd you kiss me?"

Oh fuck. I don't know why I did it, how in the hell can I explain it to you? The fabric on the chair drew her eye, its pale salmon embroidered upholstery an absorbing swirl of criss-crossing lines. The answer to that question dug into things she'd just as soon stay buried. *So what? You're going to lie to her? Isn't that what you were pissed off about to start with?* Simply not answering, never occurred to her, and Reed struggled to find the words to explain. "I wanted to hurt you as badly as I had been hurt." She looked away. "I used the only weapon I had at my disposal—my body." It had backfired though; the kiss had had far more impact on her

than it was supposed to. “Bodies and talent.”

“Your body has never been worth more to me than your friendship.” The expression on Jae’s face was inscrutable, leaving her without a clue what to say next.

Non-plussed, Reed moved to the offensive. “So are you telling me that you aren’t attracted to me?”

Jae went completely still, then her hand began to tug at her forelock, the short blonde strands eluding her grasp.

If it hadn’t been such a serious moment, she would have laughed. As it was, it was a near thing. Reed continued to watch as Jae covered every square inch of the chair with fidgeting body parts.

“I thought we were talking about why you kissed me?”

The evasion was answer enough. “My turn,” Reed said, letting Jae off the hook for now. It was a subject best avoided, her own truths in the matter not information she wanted revealed. “Why are you here?”

Fresh from one jolting question, Jae was unprepared for the sudden escalation of things. The chair was too confining and she wanted to get up and move, but was bound in place by her promise. “You walked off the set of my movie. You promised not to.”

“No. I promised not to leave without a good reason.”

She was missing something, Jae was sure of it. There was something behind the question. The conversation had become a complex tango—what was being said aloud was not as important as why or how. “It’s a good reason,” Jae confirmed.

Reed remained silent, eyes guarded.

Jae struggled to stay in the moment. “Are you planning to come back to work?” Her tone of voice was much more casual than she would have believed possible.

It was the wrong question. She saw it instantly in the flash of pain across Reed’s face and the total shuttering of her eyes. *What did I miss?* Jae squirmed, picking at her thumb instead of tugging at her hair. *Bodies and talent.* It made sense, everything the actress had revealed about her previous exposure to directors and Hollywood had been about bodies or talent, never about Reed herself. *She’s been used so many times, she looks for it. And on the heels of my all but telling her I was attracted to her—okay, so how do I fix it?*

A *three foot radius*. Critically, Jae judged the distance from the chair to the bed. Eyes long used to judging camera angles and shot length easily assessed the gap. Not wanting to move too quickly and risk startling Reed, she smoothly stood and in two measured confident strides was at

the bedside. Fluidly she sat, body half turned to face her companion, one foot tucked under the leg that remained on the floor.

Her arrival went unacknowledged as Reed merely absorbed the dipping of the mattress. The longer the silence remained, the harder it would be to break, so Jae continued to cast about for what to say, for the perfect words to soothe the hurt. But this wasn't a romance novel; there were no perfect words. *And it's not like you have a proven track record of finding the right things to say in relationships anyway.*

Still, she had to try. "I'm going to put my director's hat on here for a minute. You walked away from filming a movie without saying a word to anyone, and you're surprised to find someone wondering if you're coming back?"

"No. I'm surprised to find *you* wondering."

Jae swallowed, the bitterness and hurt that laced Reed's words brought a lump to her throat, constricting it. *Wait a minute here. She walked away from my film, so why am I the one feeling apologetic? I believed in her when no one else did.* With punishing clarity, Jae understood. *I had more information than anyone else did, too.* She had known that it wasn't a fit of pique that had driven the actress out of Hollywood the first time, that there was in reality no pattern of walking off movie sets. "I know you left because of Rio and not in a fit of pique. But I don't know that you're coming back. It might hurt, but it's a legitimate question."

Jae watched the muscles along Reed's jaw contract slightly, a visual clue to the maelstrom the actress was mired in. It was another of those fabulous contradictions; Reed could convey even the tiniest nuances of meaning with her facial expressions and voice when she was performing, but in private the clues had to be searched out and interpreted. Like now. What would be interesting to see was who actually answered—Reed or Dar.

"I'll finish it." Reed's voice was tight, jaw still clenched.

"Thank you. But you know something?" Laser points of vibrant ice turned in her direction, almost physical in their touch upon her own eyes, and silently bade her to continue. "As just Jae, the movie pales next to how much I want Rio to be okay."

"Thanks."

There was more she wanted to explain, more that she needed Reed to understand. It took every ounce of courage Jae had, but she held Reed's eyes and took a risk of her own. "Work has always been easy—not even work really. And no matter what was going on—or not going on—with

my personal life—there was work. Nothing personal was ever allowed to interfere with making a film. I'm good at what I do, and I love it. But you came along and shredded the cocoon. They aren't separate anymore."

The last of the surface issues was on the table, leading them into an area she had tap-danced away from earlier. *Am I really prepared to go there? And do I even have a choice anymore?* No. Briefly she considered not speaking at all, torn between asking a question, and making a statement, either one of which would irretrievably alter their relationship. *Right, like it's not already been mangled and put through a wringer?*

Instead it was Reed who changed the tempo, taking the lead. "I can't give you what you want."

"And what might that be?"

Reed faltered. Her mouth opened then closed, without a single syllable uttered.

The tension level shot up unbearably, and Jae found herself looking longingly at the door. *What in heaven's name are you thinking, backing her into a corner?* The brass handle beckoned, seeming a lot closer than it had a bare second ago, the only obstacle between the train wreck she sensed coming and safety.

Jae's question continued to hang in the small space between their bodies and Reed fought the desire to fling herself off the bed and toward the window, or the chair, surprised at how strong the urge was to move. They were deep into it now, and there wasn't a joke in the world that was going to get her out of it. *All right, let's lay it on the line then. Black and white.* "Me."

"What? I'm not tall enough for you?"

Taking the humorous escape offered, Reed quirked a grin and replied dryly. "Actually, it's not the height. It's the accessories."

"That's the most interesting way I've ever heard it put." A devilish spark lit the director's eyes. "And you can shop for accessories."

The brief respite was gone, swallowed up by the truth behind the jest. "What the fuck do you want from me?" She hurled the question at Jae.

Jae flinched, then lifted her chin, anger tinting her words. "Nothing you aren't willing to freely give. And I could ask you the same thing. What do you want from me? You kissed me, remember? You know what, Reed? I don't think you have a clue."

It was Reed's turn to flinch. The sting of Jae's words sliced at wounds too long left to fester, the scars more painful than the original cuts. *What*

do you want from her?

“Or is that what scares you? That you want me.” Jae’s voice was calm, words almost an afterthought.

Reed went still, the objects in the room snapped into static motion, and her entire world was reduced to the handbreadth of space between her and her accuser. “Stop.” Guttural and harsh, the plea fell into the gap that separated the two of them. “Don’t.” The monosyllables were the best arguments she could muster, unable to mount a counterattack of her own. She’d thought to leave Jae off balance, and instead she was the one teetering on the edge of a precipice.

“Okay.”

It took a minute for the quiet agreement to seep through the rising panic. “That’s it?” *What’s the catch? There’s gotta be more.*

She felt more than saw Jae get up off the bed and move so they were facing. “Look at me.” A slight pause and an even lower tone. “Please.”

She couldn’t. Her head remained fixed in place, mind and body once more at war. A soft palm cupped her chin, holding it for a second or two—time had become strangely dilated—it could have been longer, or shorter. Reed could feel the pulse point at the junction of her throat and chin leap against Jae’s hand, her heart rate nearly trebling upon contact. And once more her world shrank, now reduced to blood, skin and touch.

“Please,” Jae repeated. The barest pressure accompanied the plea, enough to prompt her into movement, but not enough to force it.

“No.” Even as she said it, her head tilted up, inclining of its own volition, and reflexively she squeezed her eyes shut, shuttering her soul against the promise of pain.

But she didn’t need her eyes to see Jae’s calm expression or read the reassurance reflecting from deep pools of healing green. That image was burned upon her brain and not dependent on visual clues. Removing one sense only heightened the others. A wisp of vanilla, a dash of alcohol, and to bind them, Jae’s own unique scent.

The void left by lack of words was filled with the complex mix of breathing, the radiator, and the night noises of an ancient building.

And still there was touch.

Jae’s skin on hers.

Breath that tickled the edge of her ear, and moved long tendrils of hair along a faux windswept path that meandered along the side of her face.

The press of a khaki clad leg against her denim clad one.

Now Reed could feel the racing rhythm of Jae’s heart in the director’s

fingertips, keeping time with her own.

And then her eyes were open. There was a tic at the corner of Jae's left eye, the lid struggling to keep tempo with the coursing of their twinned heartbeats.

It was a daunting instant of limitless possibilities, an endless array of futures; from this one moment in time, all others would spring forward, taking shape from the mold they were about to cast.

Reed's lips were dry, no moisture available in her mouth to ease the sensation of skin about to break, and one hand convulsed in sympathetic despair. "What?"

"I'm only going to explain this once, even if I spend a lifetime proving it. When I said I wanted nothing from you that you weren't prepared to freely give, I meant it. You asked me to stop, so I did."

Somewhere her body found the moisture that had been stolen from her mouth, and tears welled at the corner of her eyes, threatening to spill onto her cheeks, where she would no longer be able to hide them.

"I don't know what Roan did to you, but it's a good thing he's dead, because I swear to God, Reed, no one should be allowed to damage another human being the way he did you."

The words were out before she could call them back, the last lid exploding from a pressure cooker of secrets. "It wasn't Roan."

* * *

Jae sank to her knees, and let her hand drop away from Reed's face, having read the subtle signs that she instinctively recognized meant the actress no longer wanted to be touched.

"When they couldn't find any living relatives, I went to stay in a church-run group home."

As Reed paused, Jae could feel her throat constrict in fear, and she swallowed against the tightness.

"More of a parochial school, really. We had some kids that were from lower income families in the diocese, but most of us lived there at the state's expense. It was okay at first, then Father Paul took over."

There was another pause, longer this time, a distant look in Reed's eyes. *Oh God.* Jae didn't know what she had been expecting to hear. *Details about the fire, an abusive lover, anything but...* She shied away from naming her fear. Torn between wanting to know what was haunting her friend and fear that she couldn't handle the details, Jae struggled to find a way to prompt Reed that wouldn't send her over an

emotional cliff or make her retreat. The fear of inadvertently saying the wrong thing won out, and she remained silent, hoping that her continued presence would be reassurance enough.

“We all knew what was going on, but no one ever talked about it. Like if we didn’t talk about it—then it wasn’t really happening.”

“It was an unspoken rule that we tried to protect the younger kids. It didn’t always work. Some nights it was too quiet; some nights it wasn’t quiet enough. And always we watched for the turning of the door handle.” The words were stark, unadorned by embellishment and devoid of emotion.

Jae waited for Reed to continue, but the actress had gone someplace deep inside her memories, her eyes looking vacantly past the painted walls. There was more, she was sure of it, but pushing seemed like a bad idea. *She can’t take much more, not tonight. I can’t take much more.*

It was true. As selfish as it seemed, Jae knew she didn’t want to hear any more right now. It hurt too much. The very flatness of Reed’s delivery told her how much pain was hidden under the stony façade. *Almost as though she can radiate everyone’s pain but her own.*

What did you see? Whatever Reed had seen, or experienced, it had left deep scars, that she could see, but something was missing. *What aren’t you saying?* In the grip of indecision, she wrestled with her options, wanting to soothe away Reed’s hurt and, by proxy, her own. The empathy she had always felt for the pain of others had left her vulnerable to Reed’s, and she could feel the angry hot tears fighting for release as her body fought to express emotions that Reed wouldn’t.

The urge to move had departed in the wake of her need to be held, and Jae wondered if Reed felt the same. *Can I say with touch, what I don’t have the words for? Is she ready for that?* A lump constricted her throat again and a large tear dropped from the corner of one eye. *How alone you must have felt—must feel.*

Reed looked catatonic and the fire was gone from her eyes. Not even a ghost of pain showed, so deeply had she retreated from the room. There was no flicker of recognition or hint of awareness as Jae gingerly eased onto the bed. “Reed,” she whispered quietly. It was a small window into the agony Reed must have experienced waiting for Rio to awaken, powerless to speed the process and unable to reach through the dark curtain that separated them.

But even in the darkness Riordan had Reed, and Reed had had nobody. With that, the tears she had been holding in found release, involuntarily unleashed by a mix of anger and futility; that there was nothing she

could do, no one she could punish.

Nothing except to be there.

"Reed," she tried again, this time bringing one hand up to curl around one of Reed's. She let her thumb trace small circles over the skin, gently trying to draw her friend back. Unbidden, a snatch of a Melissa Etheridge song danced through her thoughts, an eerily appropriate match for how she felt. *I know your heart has held its own fear. It's perfectly clear what they did to you. In my heart, it's the screaming I hear. I won't let them come near, since my love knew you.*

She'd heard Reed scream in the night, felt the fear in the frenzied pounding of the actress' pulse, but this calm terrified her more. *Do something! Anything. She needs to know that this time, she's not alone.* "I'm here, Reed." Jae shifted position slightly, moving closer. "I've got you."

Swallowing her fear, and prepared to back off instantly, Jae brought their bodies into contact. "I've got you." Once again she wished for something clever to say, some way to shred the fog, but nothing came to mind, and she struggled on, fighting her own fatigue and overload.

The body in her arms remained rigid, as though still unaware, and Jae just sat. *I'm not going to be much fun to deal with tomorrow. Not without a caffeine IV, anyway.* She moved again to ease a cramp forming in her leg and caught a whiff of her own sweat. *That smell alone should bring Reed around. I need a shower or two. Not to mention a good meal. We could probably both use a good meal, and a long hot bath. Oh, good one, babe.*

"Hey, Reed. I'm going to run you a hot bath. I want you to stand up, okay? C'mon, Roo, up we get." Jae stood, and continued to talk, trying to break through, the nickname another attempt at jolting Reed out of her reverie. "Of course I could just stand you in the shower and turn the water on. I doubt you'd notice."

"Would."

Startled, Jae nearly walked into the doorframe, barely avoiding mashing her nose on the wooden trim. *Yes! Thank heavens.* She buried her elation under a tease. "Well it's not like we can test that theory now." The taps turned easily in her hands, and she let the water flood the large porcelain tub. It was an older hotel, decorated much as it would have been in the thirties, but, reflected Jae, there was something to be said for period décor. "I love these huge old-fashioned tubs."

"We have a claw-foot one at home." Reed's tone was still flat, and her movements were jerky, almost mechanical.

Pausing a moment, she studied the actress. *Time to back off. Let her pull herself together.* Suicide wasn't Reed's style, so she straightened and

nonchalantly stretched, hiding her relief in the motion.

“While you have a bath and dig out some clean clothes, I’m going to go round up some food. I don’t know about you, but between all the travel and time zones, I’m famished.” Her stomach growled, punctuating the statement with truth. “Any preferences?”

A negative shake of the head was the only response.

Jae took a large towel from the rack and laid it on the counter. The water was close to overflowing, so she reached past an oblivious Reed and shut off the flow. “You’re not going to drown while I’m gone, are you?”

“No.”

“Good. ’Cause I’d like a bath too, and I really don’t want to have to move your body out of the way to do it—or wait for a police report.” It was slightly on the morbid side, but she hoped that the absurdity and irreverence would break the mood, and allow Reed to recoup. “I’ll be back before you even know I’ve left.” She turned and left the room, grabbing her pocketbook and keys from the counter near the door.

“Jae?”

She held the door ajar, looking back over her shoulder. “Umm?”

“I’d know.” Then the actress turned away, lifting her t-shirt off before dropping it to the floor.

Exiting the room, Jae shut the door tightly, then leaned against its solid weight. In two words, the pain and anguish of the last few hours had been bought and paid for. At a bargain price.

FORTY-ONE

The water wasn't hot enough. Could never be hot enough. Reed sank below the surface, letting the steaming liquid fill her eyes and ears. Under the water, the world disappeared, no sights, no sounds. There were only the gentle pressure of the tub and the slight chill where exposed skin met air to remind her of the space beyond the narrow confines.

Heat began to seep through her pores and she drank it in, letting it ease the knots from her back. A quick shower in Rio's room had taken care of the evidence of travel, but hadn't done much to rejuvenate fatigued muscles. The bath was accomplishing at least that much. Even as the muscles relaxed slightly her mind continued to dance along the edge of memory, increasing her anxiety. It was impossible to stay submerged. The water stung and burned her eyes if she left them open. Closing them brought darkness, and the darkness brought a fresh pull to memories no longer locked in the past.

Mechanically, she lathered the soap. Large bubbles dropped into the water and she watched them bob along. The bar slipped out of her hands, diving submarine-like to the bottom of the tub. Reed stared at the soap, transfixed, lather still dribbling from her fingertips and floating on the heat driven water currents.

"Can I stay in here with you guys?"

"Not tonight, Will."

"Please, Ree?"

She almost gave in, but Michelle rolled her eyes and, wanting to please the older girl, Reed stood firm. "Michelle and I want to talk. Girl stuff."

He looked about to cry, but nodded agreement.

"I'll come read you some more of 'The Little Prince,' tomorrow night, okay?"

But there hadn't been a tomorrow night. Reed squeezed her eyes tight, trying to shut out the images.

Will's eyes squeezed shut and he swallowed once. "Promise?"

"Yeah, kiddo, I promise. Now get out of here before I tickle you."

He scampered out the door, cartoon-like.

"What a baby. How come you pamper him?"

"I don't."

"Sure you do, Reed. I saw you give him your dessert, and you read to him almost every night."

Watching the door, she answered flippantly, "Jealous?"

"Maybe."

Intense brown eyes focused tightly on hers, and Reed looked away quickly.

"Well, if you really want to hear 'The Little Prince,' I could go get it."

"I have a better idea. Hungry?"

"A little. Why?"

Michelle grinned back. "What say we blow this place? I'll even buy you a soda."

"What if we get caught?"

"We won't. And you know as well as I do that no one's gonna check on us. Now are you game or not?"

"I'm game." Nervously she followed Michelle, excited by the idea of escaping for a couple of hours.

The night passed in a sugar and pizza induced haze, the passage of time marked only by empty glasses and limp cardboard boxes. Stifling a giggle, Reed crawled in the window behind her companion, her height giving her an advantage over the smaller Michelle, who was untangling herself from the bedspread.

She looked over. Michelle had stopped giggling and was instead regarding her solemnly.

Reed's stomach felt queasy, the junk food not settling. "I need to go." Hurriedly, she got up and headed back to her own room. Focused on the nervous tension that had invaded her evening, she wasn't paying attention to her surroundings and collided with another person.

The remaining euphoria from her evening of freedom fled as she recognized Father Paul leaving Will's room with one of the older boys.

Clear eyes topped by a mop of blonde hair bored into hers, and she swallowed convulsively, fear turning the food in her stomach to lead.

"Out after curfew? We can't have children here who can't follow the rules. Of course...." He let the words trail off, closing Will's door behind him. The other boy left hurriedly, leaving her alone with Father Paul.

The message was clear: her silence in exchange for his.

"Have I made myself understood, Reed? Or are you anxious to try life on the streets? Hmm?"

"No, Father Paul."

"You're a smart girl, Reed. Smart enough to know that little girls who sneak out after hours don't have much credibility." His oily words poured over her, leaving her feeling dirty. "Now go to your room."

“Yes, Father.” She wanted to check on Will, but didn’t dare, huddling alone in her bed all through the night.

It was a decision that still haunted her. Then, like now, no amount of water brought absolution from a promise she hadn’t been able to keep and another goodbye she hadn’t been able to say.

Hot tears slid down her cheeks, dropping into the water, tiny splashes showering her chest with cold from the chilled water. The doorknob squeaked, and she cowered against the porcelain, her turn come at last.

* * *

Jae fumbled with the door handle, juggling keys in one hand, and the bag of junk food in the other. “Reed?” The moment the door swung open, the sound of crying wafted through. Awkwardly she hung back, not wanting to intrude on private pain.

“No.”

The plea was choked out, and the desperation it carried galvanized her. “Reed?” The actress was huddled against the side of the tub, arms wrapped protectively around her torso, legs folded under her body. *She looks so small.* But what struck Jae was the blue tinge to Reed’s lips. Moving slowly, she knelt beside the tub. “You need to get out before you freeze to death.” Reaching for the plug, she was unprepared for the wall of icy liquid that soaked her front as Reed recoiled from the intrusion, and she aborted the attempt.

Okay, so maybe leaving her by herself wasn’t such a great idea. She had wanted to give Reed privacy and space, but it was obvious that Reed was still locked in whatever memories their earlier conversation had triggered. The water was draining, and Jae could see the progression of goosebumps along the actress’ skin as the air hit the chilled flesh. *What did they do to you?* Jae realized she might never know, that Reed quite possibly would never tell, but her imagination filled in the details, creating scenario after scenario, each more horrible than the last.

Reed made no further move to get out. The actress continued to shiver, but it was the look on her face that nearly tore out Jae’s heart.

Without thinking, she stood and stepped into the large tub, gasping aloud at the shock of the cold water soaking through her pants and socks. Jae steeled herself for chill still to come as she folded her body in front of Reed. *Holy cow! This water is freezing!* Goosebumps of her own formed under the saturated clothes and across the backs of her arms.

Reed was regarding her in shock, eyes wide.

Pretending not to notice, Jae reached behind her back and once again felt for the plug, this time pulling it. As the cold water drained, she turned the hot water tap on full, thankful that one side benefit of hotels was the unlimited water supply.

“What are you doing?”

Jae looked up. “Refilling the tub.”

“What are you doing in the tub with your clothes on?”

“Keeping you company.”

“Oh.”

Taking a chance, Jae slid forward, placing one leg outside of Reed’s body and wrapped one arm around a bare shoulder, bringing the actress’ head in contact with the damp sweatshirt. “You look like you could use a hug.”

There was a moment’s resistance, then Jae felt one of Reed’s hands curl into the material, twisting it under her grip, sobs beginning anew. “Whatever it is can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Promise?”

On the verge of promising, Jae hesitated. “I can’t promise that for you, only you can do that. But I can promise to be here if you ever want to talk about it. And I can promise to be here even if you don’t want to.”

Reed didn’t reply verbally but seemed to sag, releasing some of the pent up emotion.

It was back. Jae wasn’t entirely sure how, but somehow, in spite of the issues still left to discuss, they had recaptured the trust that bound them so closely in Orlando. “Thank you,” Jae whispered, not meaning to speak out loud.

“For what?” Reed’s voice was stronger now, not so distant sounding.

“This.”

Reed pulled back slightly, blue eyes meeting Jae’s through the sheen of fresh tears. “For making you sit fully clothed in a bathtub full of tepid water?”

“Yup,” Jae answered. Happily, she leaned back, careful to avoid the taps, bringing Reed with her, until they were both more comfortable. “For being reason enough to get, fully clothed, into a tub of freezing water at three o’clock in the morning, stone cold sober.”

“Oh.” Reed paused a moment, as if digesting the words. “You’re welcome.”

The water was once again ice cold and, trapped in wet clothes, Jae began to shiver. The body curled against her had finally quieted, bringing to mind her cousin's iguana. It had only been possible to handle the reptile in its torpid state. *Now there's a flattering comparison.* Jae wished she could tell if the actress' stillness was her normal flake out response or, if this time it was driven by something darker. Her own need to fidget assuaged by repetitive smoothing of Reed's damp hair, she continued to hold her friend.

"Your roots are showing." A quarter inch of red-brown hair was visible along the center part, and Jae touched her fingertips to the telltale evidence that Dar's hair colour was courtesy of the studio stylist, not natural to the actress playing her.

The backs of Reed's fingers touched her cheek, pressing gently against the chilled skin. "And you're freezing."

"A little," she admitted.

With no further ado, Reed unfolded her body from the contorted position she had been sitting in and stood, gingerly stepping out of the tub. Foregoing a towel of her own, the actress held a large white towel out in front. "Here."

Jae hesitated, then stood and began to shuck the sodden clothes. As soon as she stepped out of the tub, Reed handed her the towel and limped slowly from the room. She waited a minute to give the other woman time to find some clothes, before following.

"You don't go in much for wardrobe variety, do you?" Reed held up a couple of identical sweaters.

"Being from LA, I don't have much suitable for fall in the east. I bought three of everything that fit. There wasn't time to send Cait."

"Waters buys your clothes?"

Jae caught the shirt Reed chucked in her direction. "I hate to shop, she loves it. Works for both of us."

"I see."

There was an unvoiced question behind the statement, and Jae sighed. *And now it begins.* She was used to this part of coming out. All of her relationships with other women were now suspect, viewed through the filter of her sexuality. "The answer is no. And how many of those did you steal?" Reed was tugging another of the Navy sweatshirts that were her character's trademark, over her head.

"Four." Reed settled the sweatshirt into place and pulled her hair out of the neck.

"We need those for filming, you know." Finished dressing, Jae

grabbed the bag of groceries from the floor where they'd been unceremoniously dumped.

"I'm only making them look less new. Were you ever lovers?"

"No." The value pack of cereal gave her something to turn over in her hands as she thought. *I could leave it at that. But maybe she needs to know that it's not all about sex.* "We decided that while it might be fun, our working relationship and friendship were more valuable. That was over five years ago." The Froot Loops flew out of the cellophane wrapper and landed on the bed. She grinned sheepishly. "Those are for Rio."

"Ri-ight."

"They are." Jae tossed Reed a box of Special K. "My relationships aren't defined by my sexuality. Nor are my interests, political beliefs or the shows I watch on TV. There's more to me than whom I choose to sleep with."

"How come I can't have the Frosted Flakes?" Reed whined, imitating her character.

Jae played along, supplying the next line. "Those are so bad for you."

One of the small blue boxes was stolen from the wrapper. "What are these for?" Reed held up a package of polystyrene bowls.

"The cereal." She looked at Reed, puzzled by what seemed like an obvious answer.

"Where's the fun in that? It's its own cereal bowl." The actress slid her thumbnail down the front of the box and peeled it open, the wax paper following suit. "Just add milk."

"Let me guess. I bet you can actually open Kraft dinners by pressing on the perforations too."

"Yep." Reed splashed milk into her makeshift bowl and dug in with a plastic spoon.

"So are we okay?" Jae blurted out the question before she could chicken out and let the relaxed atmosphere sidetrack them. Things felt okay, but Jae needed to be sure. While she waited for an answer she fumbled with the box, which refused to transform into a bowl.

"Give me that." In seconds the box was open and ready for milk. "If you meant what you said in your note, then yes. We're okay."

My note? Then Jae remembered. *She read it?* "I meant it."

Reed nodded and continued to munch her cereal.

It seemed the last hurdle had been cleared, and Jae dug into the Corn Flakes with gusto.

"And that's all you want from me? My friendship?"

The flakes turned to sawdust in her mouth, and only her mother's

incessant lectures on decorum kept her from spitting them back into the makeshift bowl. It would be so easy to just say nothing at all. To let it slide and let the attraction die, unacknowledged. Time would take care of it, as it had with Cait and others. *Reed is not Cait*. “Are you sure you want the answer?”

“No more lies between us, Jae.”

Jae inhaled, then let the air out slowly, marshalling her thoughts, afraid that she would get only one chance to explain. A wrong step here and the dance would end—the painstaking bridge building of the last few hours swept aside under the likely renewal of mistrust. “That’s all I want. Would I be happy with more? I don’t know. I do know that it’s up to us to define how our relationship works. We make the choices.”

“And how would you define it?”

Jae started to answer then stopped. “No.”

“No?”

“No. Not this time. I’m not taking all the responsibility for this.” Jae swung her legs into the space between the two beds and leaned forward. Her palms were sweating slightly and she rubbed them across her pants. *Oh, bright one. Push her*. It was an important point, and she kept a lid on the spark of anger. “I’ve spent two weeks tied in knots, and even before that, second-guessing everything. But you know what? It’s not all one-sided. It’s not just about what I want and how I feel, or about me being gay. It’s two-sided, and it’s time you picked up your end.”

“You want me to set the boundaries?”

The barriers between them were down, and Jae sensed that if they were going to be able to honestly talk about this, it had to happen tonight, before the outside world intruded again. “No, Reed. I want *us* to set them. Together.” She took another deep breath then released her next words. “And the ‘no more lies’ thing works both ways.”

For a second Jae thought she’d gone too far.

“My life is a series of lies. I go from one to another; each one is real while I’m there, only to be replaced by the next role, the next lie. Ten years ago I was a murderer, after that a research scientist, then a DEA agent. Today I’m the lesbian vice president of a multi-national corporation. None of it is real.”

Jae held her tongue and waited for the actress to give context for the confusing speech.

“I don’t know how much of what has gone on is me, and what is Dar. Did I like kissing you? Yes. But I’m not going to do it again, and that’s a boundary you are going to have to accept.”

Reed looked directly at her, awaiting some response. The unexpected confession left Jae reeling slightly. Things weren't all one-sided after all. "We're playing with fire, aren't we?"

"Maybe. But you're the one who said it was up to us to define our relationship and that the choices are ours."

"Hugs are still okay, right?"

Reed laughed. "Like you could stop. The naked haircuts have to go, though."

It was Jae's turn to laugh, and she took another scoop of the now soggy cereal.

"I am curious about one thing." Reed dug a new spoon out of the bag, a couple spilling onto the floor.

"What's that?" Jae mumbled around the mouthful of cereal.

"How come you're single?"

"Curious tonight, aren't we? They keep dumping me. Probably 'cause I'm not the most considerate of girlfriends. I tend to put my job ahead of my love life. In short, I'm told I make a lousy girlfriend." She felt compelled to explain, but couldn't think of anything else to say and went for humour instead. "So it's a good thing you and I are just friends. We'll last longer."

"Ah."

Jae looked up, unable to tell just what "ah" meant. *Well, turnabout is fair play.* "What about you?"

Reed laughed. "I don't have a girlfriend 'cause I don't want one."

"Wiseacre."

"Yep. But I'm your wiseacre." Another piece of normalcy snapped back into place between them.

"I meant ... why are you single?"

Reed stayed silent, once again looking at some point over Jae's shoulder.

"Sorry. You don't have to tell me. It's none of my business."

"It's all right. No one's ever asked me that before. Not even Heidi." The actress paused. "Except the media, of course. But they don't count."

"And I bet you didn't answer either."

"Wrong. But they couldn't print the answer I did give."

"You are so bad."

"They eat it up, though. Fits the image, keeps the legend alive." The clock rolled over, the double zero dropping into place with a soft click. "C'mon. I'm chatted out, and it's time to get back."

Jae got off the bed and stretched, a yawn escaping involuntarily.

"I can take a cab back. You need to get some sleep."

"Later. Unless you don't want me there."

There was no pause. "No, I could use the company. Can I ask a favour?"

"Yes." She handed over the crutches, surprised at how much Reed's mobility had improved over the last few hours.

"Bring your guitar?"

"Sure. No problem." She rang for the car, and they headed for the elevator. Jae carried her guitar, the canvas briefcase slung over a shoulder.

They entered the lobby, and the thump of the crutches echoed weirdly in the sparsely furnished space.

Jae smiled back and opened the glass door, unprepared for the glare of flashbulbs that popped from the darkness beyond the carport.

"Whoa."

"Fuck."

The valet opened the car doors and they rapidly dove inside, another expletive escaping Reed as her crutches caught in the door.

"Guess movie stars are big news in Bangor."

"Oh, I dunno. It's your hotel, not mine."

"As if." She shook her head. "What a way to start a morning."

Reed glanced over, giving her a droll look. "You get used to it."

* * *

Jae had gone for coffee, and Reed watched the gentle rise and fall of Rio's chest. She couldn't put her finger on why exactly, but it seemed different now that she knew he was merely sleeping. She'd actually reached over a couple of times and rested her hand against the flannel of his pajamas, feeling the air lift her hand as his lungs filled on their own.

Reed sat back against the wall, not taking her eyes from the still slumbering child. The whole night felt like a dream, and for the first time in as long as she could remember, she was afraid to wake up.

They'd worked it out. Somehow. And in an hour, maybe less, Rio would open his eyes again, smile and the worst nightmare of her life would be over. Exhausted beyond the repair of even caffeine, another yawn nearly split her jaw, and she struggled to keep her eyes open, no longer able to draw on the adrenaline that had kept her going since leaving Los Angeles.

"I hope you found espresso."

Jae followed the aroma into the room. "At quarter to five in the morning? I found a vending machine. There's enough sugar in this hot chocolate to fuel the space shuttle."

She reached for one of the cardboard cups, but the director held them out of reach.

"Go to sleep, Reed."

"I can't."

"Yes you can. You promised to be here when he woke up, and you will be. They didn't bring this roll away bed in here just for you to admire." Jae sat at one end and patted her lap. "Down."

Reed arched a brow.

"C'mon. You know you want to."

And Jae was right; she did. Now that the possibility of sleep had been broached, she could feel her body shutting down. She mustered a final argument. "What about you?"

Jae held up a pillow and tucked it between her shoulder and the corner she was leaning against. "I sleep better sitting up. Now c'mon."

Reed placed the other pillow under her own head and stretched her legs out on the bed, gingerly flexing her left leg to see if it had stiffened up. *Sore, but I'll live.* Cool fingers pressed against her temples and she opened her eyes, but Jae wasn't looking down, her attention instead focused somewhere else.

Jae's fingers began circling, easing away a headache that Reed hadn't even been aware she'd had. "Better?"

"Yes." And it was. Not just the headache either. Reed closed her eyes again and let the gentle rhythm guide her toward sleep. "Night, Jae," she mumbled.

"Night, Reed."

Jae's voice had grown indistinct, and she wasn't sure if it was a result of falling away from wakefulness, if the director was also drifting off, or both. Finally she decided it didn't matter and surrendered to the last dregs of the night.

FORTY-TWO

There it was again. Jae blinked and tried to clear the bright black spot floating on her eyes. Then another. The flashes left her slightly disoriented, and she paused on her way down the steps of the house they were filming in, afraid that she would fall.

It was constant, the press and media unrelenting in their pursuit of what they perceived to be some hidden truth or scandal.

“Ms. Cavanaugh, why have you suddenly switched locations?”

Jae drew on one of the stock answers provided by the studio publicist. “Not a big mystery—there’s no snow in Michigan and locations often change to match budgets. Bangor gave us a great reception. Now if you’ll excuse me.” All things considered, it came out much more cordial than expected, given her current frustration level with being followed around.

Another round of flashes went off, forcing her to blink again to retain her balance and her eyesight. The handrail prevented her fall and guided her down the stairs. *Too bad it can’t keep them from following.* They were merciless and Jae had watched, in morbid fascination, as the smallest details of her life were revealed to America at large. Relevance wasn’t relevant. Everything from fourth grade report cards to the number of guitar strings she broke during her last set had surfaced. *I’m learning things about myself that I didn’t know.* Her sense of humour was all that stood between her and a scream. Edvard Munch style.

Chambers was eating it up, and as a result was no help at all dealing with the rumours, choosing instead to be enigmatic, neither confirming nor denying prior knowledge of her sexuality or Reed’s peccadilloes. Jae ignored the cameraman trailing after her and headed for her car.

It was a good trade-off, her privacy for Reed’s. She just wished the media hadn’t made her love life sound so sordid. The only condition she needed to adhere to was budget. Chambers was willing to let her have the extra filming time, but the fiscal rope was tight. In one of those weird twists, even that was working in her favour. Eastern Maine Medical Center was undergoing major renovations and had an entire wing closed. A wing they were only too happy to rent out for filming in exchange for a donation to the building fund. It was a cheaper arrangement than the one that they had had in Michigan.

Distracted, she’d missed a reporter’s query, but it didn’t really matter—it would be another question without an answer. It didn’t matter how

she replied—a yes or no—either way it gave them something. She'd finally learned to just ignore those kinds of questions, though it hadn't stopped reporters from asking them. *I guess hope springs eternal.* The wry grin was replaced by a genuine smile as Jae glanced hopefully for a familiar body skulking behind the rental car.

"Is that a yes or a no, Ms. Cavanaugh?"

The good humour vanished with the interruption. "That would be a 'no comment.'" The lone ones were the worst. In a group, they served to check and balance each other—not from any social restraint, but rather to keep from being scooped. *I never thought I'd miss the gaggle that trailed us last week.*

"Does Ms. Lewis know about your continued association with Rebecca Devereaux? Your hotel phone records show several calls to a number listed to her."

"I said, and I quote, 'no comment.'" Jae let the slamming of the car door punctuate the sentiment. *My phone records? They're checking my phone records?* This time it wasn't flashes from cameras that left her unable to focus. Her eyes stung as she fought angry tears and maneuvered her car out of the parking lot toward the I95 and Bangor.

After parking the rental car in the small lot adjacent to a small park, Jae dug out her backpack and changed into running gear, maneuvering around the interior with practiced ease. The reporters couldn't keep up with her when she ran, and the rough banks of the Penobscot River kept them from following any other way. Which hadn't really been all that bad. Indulging in the late afternoon runs had given her a measure of space to think, and forced her back into a semi-regular fitness regimen that made long filming hours easier on her body.

Forty-five minutes later, Jae adjusted the scrubs and tucked the sweat pants and shirt into her backpack, out of sight. She took a last look at her reflection in the glass door, pulling her ball cap low over her forehead for good measure. *Close enough to shift change, I hope.* EMMC didn't seem as welcoming as usual, and for the first time since her arrival, Jae dreaded going into the hospital, afraid that today would be the day they got caught and the secret she'd spent weeks keeping would be out.

A ball of tension settled in her stomach and she could feel more tears beginning to form. *Get a grip. Reed doesn't need to have you crumbling now. I don't need me crumbling now.* A deep breath and she was through the doors and into the spacious lobby—into the congestion of patients, staff, and visitors. Baseball cap still pulled low, she crept to the back of

the crowd that had spilled from the plush lobby into the front entrance and blocked any possible egress.

The knot in her middle unwound as she passed unnoticed through the throng, skipping her usual foray into the gift shop, heading for the elevator and the eighth floor. Paediatrics was relatively quiet, a lot of the children eating or sleeping, the steady ping of machinery replacing the sometimes surprisingly boisterous laughter that often rang through the halls. At first she'd hated the sounds of respirators and heart machines, but now she found them comforting. Every ping, every beep, meant a child was alive.

The beeps from Rio's room were steady and regular, auditory proof that he had come through his second surgery in fine shape. Jae knocked lightly on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." His eyes never left the small TV mounted over his bed but he moved over slightly, making room.

She crawled onto the empty space, indulging with guilty pleasure in some down time, and suddenly the day didn't seem so bad. The production problems faded a little as she watched the mindless antics of Pinky and the Brain. The plots in the episodes of Rugrats that followed were almost painful to watch, but she enjoyed Rio's unabashed glee in Tommy's revenge on Angelica.

He squirmed closer and she let him curl up against her, supporting his weight, letting her mind wander. It was an unexpected bonus, being trusted with not only Reed's secrets but with her son. Jae ruffled his hair, the dark curls falling naturally back into place, and gave him a small hug, avoiding any outright mushiness. "I'm going to grab a soda. Want a Popsicle?" She was pretty sure he could have one of those.

"Lime?"

"You got it." It took a few minutes to find a nurse and double check that Rio was allowed the frozen treat, and a few more to locate a lime Popsicle.

When Jae got back, voices were emanating from the room, and she speeded up, sensing that something wasn't right.

"She's a friend of my mum's."

"Oh, and who is your mother?"

The question was asked casually, and Rio started to answer. "Get out." Jae didn't know or care who the man was. The camera was enough to signal bad news.

Bright light exploded in the room as the flash went off and another picture was taken. Jae didn't stop to think about it, just reached for the

camera. A fist connected with the side of her head and she heard the man wince in pain, his knuckles less solid than her skull.

Jae heard the soft crunch before she felt the nasal bone give under her fist. The reporter crumpled to the floor, one hand over his nose, the other supporting his weight. Still on autopilot, she opened the back of the camera and pulled on the film, throwing it at the reporter.

"You bitch." Blood stained the front of his vest, matting against the yellow fleece.

"We'll see how an assault charge plays," husky tones purred quietly from just inside the room.

Jae turned to face the newcomer, and the sudden shocking realization of just how serious a mistake she'd made hit her hard. The woman was dangling a camera from a broad black strap, its lens unshuttered, a cocky smile twisting her features in an expression of triumph, a small cell phone held loosely in her other hand.

"Jae?" Rio asked, fear and confusion on his guileless face.

"It's okay, sweetheart. Can you press your buzzer for me?" If the nurse came, then security would follow, and she could get the press out of there and buy some time.

"Good idea. After all, can't have a story without plot points. And what a story it is, too. Ms. Goody Two Shoes loses it. And I can't wait to make the acquaintance of this young man's mother."

Jae wanted to wipe the smarmy look off the woman's face, close to deciding that if she were going to hang, it might as well be for stealing the whole flock instead of just a lamb.

"Did you beat up on Rebecca Devereaux too? That's quite a temper you have there."

She was being goaded, the sole intent to force her to react. Jae knew it, and it still didn't stop her from responding to the taunts. "No. I never hit her." Only realizing after the words were out, that she had provided the first official confirmation of her relationship with Becky. It was coming unraveled, the long weeks of carefully weaving lies and truth ended with a punch. *Of all the times to lose my cool.*

Jae put herself between Rio and the unwanted company, willing them not to see the obvious. *Reed's gonna freak.*

The shift nurse appeared in the doorway. "What can I ... oh." She had enough presence of mind to yell for security. "You'll have to leave."

"Sure. We have what we came for." The reporter helped her colleague to his feet. Yellow vest's nose was no longer spilling fresh blood, the crimson stain already coagulating, and a slightly cupric smell hung in

the air.

“And what was that?” Reed spoke from the doorway. There was no mistaking the icy anger behind the question.

It was fascinating to watch. Reed seemed to grow even taller and would have dwarfed the reporter with sheer presence alone even if she hadn’t had several inches on the woman. Without bringing their bodies into contact, the actress somehow maneuvered the reporters out of the room.

Vintage Reed, Jae thought, realizing she was being treated to a performance by one of the best actresses in Hollywood. A small thump rattled the small pane of glass in the wooden door, and dark material blotted out the light from the hall. *Or maybe it wasn’t*. One thing was for sure, Jae was glad that she wasn’t in the hallway.

* * *

“Give me the film.” Reed allowed a feral grin to play over her lips, keeping any hint of warmth out of her eyes. Sometimes it was an advantage to have pale eyes.

“Reality check, babe. This is not a movie. And if you think I’m just handing over a \$200,000 chunk of film, you’re nuts.” Reed’s shock must have registered with the reporter, because the woman leaned forward, moving to the offensive, almost purring. “Translation: don’t fuck with my boss.”

Reed shoved the woman back against the door, rattling the window. Only the presence of her son on the other side kept her from repeating the move. “Don’t fuck with me.”

“Ah, ah, ah.” The admonishment was accompanied by a cockily wagged index finger. “You don’t want to join your girlfriend in jail, now do you? Felonious assault isn’t exactly CV material.” The reporter paused, then smiled. “Come to think of it, they might let you room together.”

“Judging by your buddy’s knuckles, I’m guessing the bastard deserved what he got.” The cameraman had been taken to a side room by one of the nurses, though there was still no sign of security. She moved inside the other woman’s personal space, using her size to her advantage. “And this is private property, with clearly posted signs about unauthorized visitors, so at the very least you’ll be joining us.” The quick flinch and clouding of the otherwise cocky smile told Reed she’d scored a hit, so she continued to press the advantage. “Translation: your boss won’t do

your time for you.”

There was some fire left in the reporter, because she moved forward, and Reed took a step back, retreating slightly in response.

“You can’t hide the truth forever, Ms. Lewis. And I intend to get what my boss paid for.” The smile that accompanied the words was without any humour, more warning than anything.

It clicked into place. These people were from ‘Up Close’. Apparently the tabloid had been less than pleased about the maneuvering they had done around the interview, and they were determined to get the full details this time.

“So who’s the kid? He’s cute.”

Security chose that instant to arrive, forestalling what would likely have been a very loud and very physical response on her part. As it was, it was still a near thing, and Reed let her hand drop to her side, harmlessly, clenching and unclenching the fist in order to bleed off some of her anger.

She didn’t even have to deal with it. The nurse who had intervened originally materialized and quietly directed the security staff. It made Reed wonder where the staff had been in the first place, something she would pursue later—with the hospital administrator if necessary. Right now she just wanted to see her son.

The reporter didn’t speak as she and her co-worker were escorted out of the hospital. Instead she met Reed’s eyes as the elevator doors slid open and tapped her watch, message clear.

It was only a matter of time.

Reed took a deep breath and opened the door, feeling its weight as she pushed it aside. Jae had curled up on the bed and was holding Rio, smoothing his hair as she rocked him gently. She took a minute to study the two of them. In a way she found it almost unbelievable that the director continued to generate such interest from the tabloids. But then it had been a relatively slow news year in Hollywood. Jae had tried to laugh it off, but Reed could tell that it had been getting to her friend lately, the constant scrutiny wearing on a woman who never looked for hidden agendas in other people and so couldn’t quite fathom others looking for them in her. If what the reporter in the hall had said was true, it was the first time she could remember Jae having lost control of what sometimes seemed like a supernatural calm.

Watching, unnoticed, she could see that Jae was anything but calm now. Tears were visible on the blonde’s face and it was obvious that she was only keeping herself together for the sake of the sleeping child in

her arms. *I can't protect either of them.*

And I can't choose.

Can't you? Act. Don't react. The beginnings of a headache accompanied the harsh words of her inner voice.

Remnants of the anger from the hallway coloured her internal reply with a sarcasm she rarely turned inward. *Right, and the truth shall set you free?*

Yes.

If he had to find out at all about his father, this was most definitely not the way she wanted it to happen. And it would come out, Reed realized. They wouldn't let it go until they knew everything. And what they couldn't find out, they would make up. It was only sheer luck that had kept them from figuring out that they were at the hospital to do more than film scenes.

Jae swung in her direction, and Reed read the apology without Jae needing to speak. There was fear written there as well, and instinctively she crossed the small room to wrap her arms around the director, wanting to soothe the hurt. "It's okay."

"You're not mad?" The words were hesitant, barely spoken.

Her stomach clenched as Reed realized she was responsible for the fear clouding the normally confident and bright eyes. "Not at you." What hurt more was the awareness that Jae's fear wasn't misplaced; her past behaviour more than justified Jae's reaction. Reed traced the soft hair under her hand, pausing as she encountered slight swelling just behind a delicate ear. "So it was self-defense."

"Not exactly. But I did get the film." The bit of plastic in question still lay crumpled on the floor where it had been dropped. "I'm sorry."

Reed turned to look directly at her friend. "No. I'm the one who's sorry. You don't deserve this."

"Neither do you."

But that wasn't really true. They were her mistakes, and maybe if she had taken more responsibility for them sooner, Jae wouldn't be sporting a lump on the side of her head, or facing a possible assault charge. *I guess we'll see if the truth is enough to at least set you free, 'cause it sure as hell ain't going to do me much good.* She wrapped her hand around one of Jae's smaller ones. "Call your friend Thom. Tell him everything."

"Reed!"

She laid a finger across Jae's lips, gently but firmly cutting off the protest. "It's time." As she said it, Reed realized it was true. Roan was dead, no longer any threat, and by barricading herself behind a wall of

silence she was giving him even more power than he deserved. And maybe, just maybe, it would buy them more peace than hiding had.

“Why me?”

“Because I need to tell Riordan.”

“Oh.”

“Please?”

The assent was given by a thoughtful nod as Rio began to stir, the movement and conversation drawing him out of the light slumber.

“Hey, kiddo. Hungry?”

Dark curls bounced from side to side as he shook his head. “I had a Popsicle.”

Reed raised a brow, pinning Jae with a mock serious glare. “And your mother accused me of not knowing what to feed kids.”

Jae laughed, shaking off the somber air that had invaded the room. “Don’t blame me ... the nurse okayed it.”

She laughed along for a minute, then sobered, the enormity of the task ahead slamming the humour out of the situation, replacing it with solid fear. Her hand was squeezed in silent support, and she mustered a wan smile as Jae disentangled herself and stood.

“I’ll be at my hotel.”

“Thank you.” The words came out much more formally than intended, but still not adequate to express what she meant.

The warm look and smile she received in reply calmed some of the trepidation, and Jae whispered, “Always.”

* * *

Reed fiddled with the blanket, then leaned down to place a featherlight kiss on the sleeping child’s forehead. He’d been tired and she wasn’t sure that he fully understood what she had been trying to tell him. Any clarification had been forestalled by Heidi’s unexpected arrival and abrupt departure, and Rio had fallen asleep during her futile effort to catch her friend.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” Reed turned to face Geoff, who was leaning against the doorframe, carryout tray, complete with steaming coffee, in hand. “I see you came armed. She still mad?” Heidi had left the room without speaking a single word.

“Ayup. Pissed.”

“I’m not going to take him away from you.”

"I know. I think she knows that, but it's hard for her."

She thought about that. All of the childcare decisions had been made jointly, the three of them sharing the parenting. For all intents and purposes he had been their son too, the community at large accepting him as such, and treating him accordingly. That had just been pre-empted.

Reed took a cautious sip of the hot coffee, the sweet caramel flavour a pleasant surprise, and mulled over the situation.

"It was time, Geoff. I couldn't hide him forever."

"Ayup. Long past time, I'm thinking. But you should have given her some time to adjust to things."

"Where is she?"

"She went for a walk."

Oh-oh. This is serious, not just a mad-on over an interview. Heidi never exercised, at least voluntarily. Reed leaned down and gave Rio a final goodnight kiss, then hugged Geoff quickly and left in search of his wife, whom she speedily found sucking air on the hotel steps.

* * *

Heidi took another gulp of the night air, desperate to get some oxygen into her starved lungs. Her legs burned and she was pretty sure that any second now she was going to pass out. Walking hadn't done anything to ease the anger—if anything she was even angrier with Reed.

The door behind her swung open, and she moved to let whomever it was past. Instead, it was Reed, who joined her on the concrete steps of the hotel, having most likely come through the hospital.

"Geoff send you?"

Reed hunched forward and tucked her hands together, right thumb rubbing at the webbing of her other hand. "No. Look, I'm sorry."

"I don't even know why you're bothering to talk to me about it at all—you just went ahead and did what you wanted." Heidi spat the words.

"It just happened."

"Protecting your new little friend was more important than respecting the ones you already have."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You figure it out." She let the words trail off, the hurt in Reed's eyes giving her pause.

"I'm not taking him away from you. It wouldn't be fair to any of us, least of all Riordan."

Heidi wondered if Reed had sidestepped her meaning on purpose or if the actress really didn't see what everyone else was beginning to. "I still don't understand why you had to tell them" In a strange way though, Heidi did understand. It was Reed through and through. Impetuous to a fault, her friend did nothing half way.

Reed met her eyes, voice low and earnest. "Because my secrets were hurting someone who didn't deserve it. But it doesn't change anything."

She looked down, breaking eye contact with the actress. "Things are changing, Reed. You're changing." Her whole world was changing. She knew it was petty, but she wanted things to stay the way they were. They hadn't been able to have children. Procrastination and tiny cysts had robbed her of a dream she hadn't realized she wanted until it was no longer possible. Then one day Reed had knocked on the door of the cozy farmhouse, and in the months that followed the four of them had forged a family. Her and Geoff, Reed and Rio, a family, finally able to live without fear.

It was terribly ironic; even she could see that. Heidi knew Reed had been afraid that she would be cast aside if Rio were no longer part of the picture, valueless without her son. Now she was the one afraid, for a healthy Rio meant change would come anyway. Reed would no longer need to work so hard, or so far away from home, and she and Geoff would no longer have a place in their lives. Heidi looked over, wondering what was going on behind the deceptively stoic façade.

Reed was still, her eyes fixed on the darkened waters of the river that bounded the hospital and hotel. Slowly the actress turned so they were facing, then spoke. "You too?" She sounded hurt. "Go ahead—get it over with—ask, everyone else has."

Heidi didn't want to ask. She wanted Reed to tell her. "I don't need to." Why ask a question you already knew the answer to? She'd seen them, that first morning. Arriving early after receiving Reed's message that Rio had woken briefly, she'd rushed into the hospital room. No, the sight of Reed curled up in the blonde's lap, while one of the director's hands stroked the longer hair of the actress, had been all the answer she needed, even if the two of them were unaware of what they projected. And maybe it was about the family growing—not shrinking—because it was clear to Heidi that Reed considered Jae family.

"C'mon, I'll buy you some orange juice." Reed stood, still favouring her leg slightly. The abrupt change of subject signaled the closing of the brief window into deeper emotional territory.

"Orange juice? After that torture session, I was hoping for a

milkshake. Of the chocolate variety.” Heidi stood too, her back screaming in agony, a pointed reminder of why running was her least favorite recreational activity imaginable.

“Deal.”

“You think Jae would like to join us?” Heidi asked. It would take some getting used to, but she was willing to try. Especially since the mere mention of the director’s name caused Reed to light up like a Christmas tree. And that, in spite of everything else, was too rare a thing not to be encouraged.

“I think if you mention the words chocolate and ice cream in the same sentence you’d have to hold her back.” Reed shook her head in mock distaste as she carefully enunciated every syllable of the word chocolate.

Heidi grinned back, unable to think of a suitably snappy comeback. *Maybe it will be easier than I thought. After all, how horrible could someone who liked chocolate be?*

FORTY-THREE

Reed leaned close to Jae. "Remind me again why I'm here."

Heidi honestly couldn't remember how she'd roped Reed and Jae into attending a wedding for someone they barely knew.

"You? That should be my line. I have no idea who these people are," Jae whispered back.

"Point," Reed agreed, amiably.

"You're here because it's a family wedding and you're family," Heidi whispered back.

A woman in front of them turned and glared. Heidi poked Reed in the ribs, and she stopped speaking, rubbing the spot with exaggerated indignation. Jae grinned, scrunching her nose. They all exchanged conspiratorial winks, then Heidi returned her attention to the ceremony. Occasionally, she turned her eyes on the other guests.

Most of her family was here. Assorted aunts, uncles, cousins, even a few relatives once or twice removed. The pews across the aisle held people who would, at the end of the wedding ceremony, be family too.

Surreptitiously she looked again at Reed.

They'd met when Rowena Lewis had taken a teaching position at the University of Maine. Reed's mother had needed to split her time between Calais and the research facility in St. Andrews, on the Canadian side. Heidi's mother had provided childcare.

She'd been ten, a year older, but still a full two inches shorter, than nine year old Reed Lewis. They were friends instantly, and even changes in interests and differing sets of friends hadn't changed it.

Only the fire that killed Reed's mother and grandmother had separated them.

"It's my fault." If she lived to be a hundred, Heidi knew she'd never forget those words. Even at sixteen, she had been able to recognize the depth of anguish they held.

"It's my fault."

She hadn't known what to say. "No. It wasn't."

Reed had lifted her head. "I wasn't home to warn them." Her eyes immediately fell to the white dressings covering both hands. "I was supposed to be ... home," her voice broke on the last word.

Then Heidi had understood. Reed had snuck out to go to the State Fair, after all.

She wiped away a tear, pretending the ceremony was the cause, and

wondered if Reed had ever forgiven herself for sneaking out, for not being home to die with her family.

Heidi didn't think so.

But somehow, whether Reed realized it or not, she had built a new one; and now that family was growing.

Everything was changing. Reed being gay, she could handle, but Heidi didn't know how she would cope with losing Rio. Her family was shrinking. Convulsively, she grabbed Geoff's hand and squeezed it tightly, needing to feel him next to her.

They'd be childless again.

She'd known the day would come when Reed would either meet someone, or would no longer need to work, and Reed had said all the right things the other night at the hospital, but still, in her heart, she knew things would never be the same. You had only to look at the two of them to know that. Jae was here to stay.

Another tear slipped down her cheek.

After all, you were allowed to cry at weddings.

* * *

Reed looked around, discovering the ceremony had ended. Chagrined, she stood and sidled out of the wooden pew, then waited for the others to join her. Together they made their way outside the church to await the emergence of the newlyweds and the progression to the reception hall.

Space opened up in front of them, and they entered the large stone church hall. Long tables lined the back wall, proudly displaying the myriad packages, boxes, bags and bright bows of the gifts deposited there before the ceremony.

Circular tables filled the majority of the hall, balloons, streamers and a dance floor taking up the remainder. Ornate, hand-lettered name cards rested on the fine china plates, the flowing calligraphy an elegant complement to the place settings.

"Here's ours." Geoff pointed at a spot on the neatly lettered seating diagram, then indicated a table on the far side of the room.

"Aren't you the perfect gentleman?" Heidi remarked to her friend as they took their seats.

It took Reed a second to figure out what Heidi was talking about, until she looked down to where her hand still rested on the back of Jae's chair. The ringing of cutlery against crystal saved her from needing to

reply, and she quickly seated herself.

Dinner followed the preliminary speeches, and the traditional roasting of the groom followed the prime rib. Music followed the last of the speeches, and the room became even more festive as the children disappeared and the alcohol began to flow more freely.

Well lubricated herself, Reed watched Geoff drag Heidi onto the dance floor, laughing as he spun his wife around with flare.

Off to one side, a group of young men were casting intermittent looks in their direction. Even augmented by occasional physical pokes and prodding encouragement, they hadn't had quite enough alcohol to give them sufficient courage to make an approach.

"I'd love to hear that conversation." Jae snagged her glass from the table, rotating it slowly in her hands.

"No. That's the one I'd pay to have heard." Reed indicated the corner where the bride and groom had been talking, and the fact that Heidi's cousin was now making her way slowly toward them.

"As long as she doesn't ask me where my husband is or when I'm getting married, I'll be happy."

Reed laughed. Poor Jae's dinner conversation had consisted largely of fending off questions from the only two people in the room who didn't know she was gay.

"Umm. Hi."

"Hello."

"I, ah, that is we, umm wanted to, we wanted to thank you for coming. To the wedding." She looked back over her shoulder, and Reed was amused to see the look of adoring encouragement her husband bestowed on her. "We, well there's dancing you see, and well, you're not, and umm we wanted to say you could. Dance, I mean. Here. Together. Thanksagainforcoming. Thankyouforthegift. Bye." She turned and fled.

Stunned, Reed looked over at an equally stunned director, and they both started laughing at the same time. Every time they looked at each other the paroxysms started again, and in order to stop they had to avoid each other's eyes.

"People are staring."

The stage whisper carried across the table and Reed smirked. "And that would be new, how exactly?" Which started Jae laughing all over again.

"I needed that. But I think we hurt their feelings."

"In that case, maybe we had better dance." Something fast and boppy

was playing; the artist she recognized, but the title escaped her.

"Then shall we?" Jae bowed and held out a hand.

They made their way to the floor and joined the throng, who paused briefly to watch before once more picking up the rhythm. Heidi and Geoff moved to join them before being shanghaied by another group of relatives. The newlyweds took to the floor, and Reed unexpectedly found herself dancing with the bride while Jae laughed.

There was another shift in tempo and partners, the director whisked away in a flurry of dance steps. As the pattern shifted, Reed caught a glimpse of red topped by a broad smile before someone claimed her as a partner and she lost track of Jae.

Once again the music changed, the seagoing history of the state, and the ancestry of its people, filling the room. Lines formed and she instinctively took her place in the reel. She stepped forward, timing her pace to bring her level with her partner in the center of the floor as they took the first turn before switching off and re-partnering.

Faster and faster the dancers whirled in response to the music, then suddenly it was over and slow piano notes replaced the frantic fiddle.

"I love this song. Dance with me?"

Reed turned to find Jae standing in a pool of light, the sheer fabric of her red dress shining under the soft glow. Before she could decide, a man stepped between them and answered, "It would be my pleasure."

Over his shoulder Jae's eyes were locked on hers, and the director gave her an apologetic grin. Suddenly feeling conspicuous, Reed left the floor and headed for the bathroom, craving privacy.

Reed was facing the mirror, but not looking in it, eyes focused instead on her hands, which rested on the counter.

But the same eyes looked back at her when she finally did raise her head.

Now she was looking at Jae, their eyes meeting in the plane of the mirror. Reed turned and leaned against the counter, its marble surface cold through the fabric of her dress.

"You okay?" Concern clouded Jae's face and she moved to stand close, one hand on the counter while the other brushed a wisp of hair away from Reed's cheek.

It crystalized in that instant. She'd felt it form in a split second on the dance floor, but it had escaped unnamed. *I'm going to kiss her. If she doesn't move, I'm going to kiss her.*

Jae didn't move and neither did she. *I'm going to kiss her.* The door could open at any second and she didn't give a damn. *I'm going to kiss*

her.

Still there was no movement, and Reed tried to figure out what had just been said. But her focus had been on the motion of her friend's lips, not on the words, and she had no idea what the topic was. Her heart was pounding so hard it would have drowned out any sounds, had she been paying attention.

Jae stepped back and the opportunity passed.

A multi-purpose answer came to her lips. "Okay." Her voice cracked before the word was complete.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Never better." She'd guessed right.

"Any room left on your dance card?"

"Yes." Normal banter was beyond her limits just now, but it seemed to pass unnoticed.

The smile she received seemed brighter than before, the eyes warmer, and Reed followed Jae out onto the floor. She couldn't hear the music, everything distant and unreal in the wake of what had almost happened.

If they were being watched, she wasn't cognizant of it. She was aware of the scent of vanilla and the smooth texture of Jae's dress. Reed let her hand rest in the hollow at the small of her partner's back. It felt different. The heat was different, the familiar curves of Jae's body alien and new. It had all changed.

The rest of the evening passed in a pleasant haze, reality only setting in with the bracingly cold fall air she had to walk through as they arrived back at the Riverside Hotel after dropping Jae at her hotel.

Mind in hyperdrive, dress discarded in a heap on the floor, she flopped onto the bed. Overhead, the ceiling fan turned with precision, navigating a predictable orbit about the central axis. She knew that, yet from where she lay watching the slow revolutions, it appeared off kilter, the path elliptical and uneven.

The moment from the bathroom played itself over and over again. She didn't need to close her eyes to be able to feel the sudden certainty. The shock still reverberated through her mind and body. Nervous tension left her unable to sleep, and she sat up in the bed.

It was the role. Had to be. Had to be the long nights of filming combined with prolonged rehearsing with Jae during the day at the hospital. Had to be the constant proximity to the director. Had to be.

Yeah, that was it all right. Proximity.

But there had been no confusion, no alcoholic haze. She'd known whom she was seeing, known who she was.

Reed hated the empty hotel room like she hadn't in the two and a half weeks that she'd been in it alone. The publicist had put them in separate hotels, which really hadn't been a problem until now. *Oh right. Like this is something I can talk to Jae about.*

Heidi was out too. The vet was having her own problems with the change in their lives. At first, she just hadn't had time to worry about it. There was Rio's second surgery, then a return to limited shooting before resuming a nearly full work schedule. By then it had become apparent that no one really cared about the truth and that when it came down to it, the world at large didn't care either. What drove publicity was the speculation. They didn't want to know—most of them had made their minds up anyway—they wanted to gossip.

Not that it wasn't awkward to have photographers jumping out at them now and again, hoping for some evidence to answer the most asked question in Hollywood these days: 'Were they or weren't they?' But that's what publicists were for, and Cait had hired a good one.

Reed smiled to herself. At some point they had begun to tease the press, first by accident, then more deliberately. It was, she reflected, interesting to have a relationship with the media that wasn't antagonistic. *Interesting? It's fun to tease them—admit it.*

It was fun. The LA Times article had changed her relationship with the press, and even the assault charge had worked in their favour. The court of public opinion had little sympathy for the fourth estate when it came to ambushing children.

Work was fun again, the way it had been when she'd first started, back before it had become a means to an end. Riordan was over the worst, his three-week hospital convalescence was nearing its end, his release expected Monday.

It was one thing when the gossip was groundless, but now.

Now it's still groundless.

I have choices. I don't have to do anything.

Except.

Except, I'm in love with my best friend.

Put that way, she could deal with it. But the second she allowed free range to the implications, it became too much. Because it wasn't simply her best friend she was in love with. It was Jae. Even thinking in those terms—as a simple name devoid of gender—it still made sense. But taken one step further, then ... then it became impossible.

Impossible.

Obviously not.

Across the room a small cardboard box rested on the desk. It seemed she once more had fans. A lot of the fan mail came via the internet, but there was still a sizable stack of more traditional handwritten letters, most of which she hadn't opened yet, preferring the sterile ease of electronic mail to handwriting. *Not Jae*. The director had reveled in the unexpected letters, some bizarre sense of history satisfied by scratching words on paper.

So what are you going to do about this?

Nothing.

Reed picked a random letter out of the box and unfolded it, curious to see how Jae had responded on her behalf. Bold, distinctive strokes splashed across stationery that was just as distinctive. The director was unlike anyone she had ever known, male or female. Jae had stood by her in ways that she still had trouble understanding. And tonight it had all changed.

No. That wasn't quite right. The changes had been gradual. She'd felt them before, odd twinges she'd shoved away under a burden of guilt and fear. It was the realization that had been sudden, almost paralyzing, leaving her unable to lie to herself anymore, no matter how badly she wanted to.

Reed turned her attention from the box to the bottle resting next to it on the table and wrenched the top from the brandy, splashing a healthy dollop into one of the glass tumblers flanking the spirits. The warm alcohol burned her mouth slightly as it washed over her tongue.

Wryly she looked at the glass, recognizing the coping mechanism. But in this case the cure was worse than the disease though not by much. The amber liquid reflected the light from the corner lamp. The beveled pattern on the tumbler served to disperse the glow, and she swirled the brandy around watching it move. It occurred to her that the treatment for both was the same and she deliberately put the brandy down, aware that she could stop drinking far easier than she could stop what was happening between her and Jae.

* * *

The strings were stretched beyond the point they would hold a tuning, but Jae continued to play, the confusion of her thoughts finding order in the progression of chords that her fingers were drawing from the guitar.

Every time she thought she'd won the battle between her body's desires and those of her heart, something else happened to throw things

back into chaos. Like tonight. Absently she fiddled with the tuning pegs, tightening the D-string before resignedly laying it aside.

Maybe the key wasn't to not be attracted to Reed—*like I have any choice there*—but rather it was about accepting that as a facet of the friendship and not as barrier to it. It had been refreshingly nice to have physical intimacy with someone that wasn't predicated on having sex, and if occasionally her body reminded her of other needs, then she would just have to deal and move on.

Like tonight.

She traced the outline of one of her breasts through the cotton nightshirt she'd changed into, aware of how sensitive it was, partially a physical reaction to Reed, and the remembered physical contact, and partially a natural reaction to where her body was in its cycle.

It wouldn't take much, and maybe it would help her sleep—or at least ensure her dreams were pleasant ones. The monthly changes in her body fascinated her, the almost imperceptible swelling and weight increase that meant a larger cup size, at least for a few days. Shirt unbuttoned, she traced the swells, enjoying the resulting shivers.

The caresses were less about achieving orgasm than about comfort and fascinated exploration, and she continued to let her hands play over her body, even as she let her mind wander over the evening's events.

I wouldn't trade it.

She dipped into the growing wetness, drawing idle circles along the outer edges, turning the unexpected thought over, surprised by the certainty washing through her.

It was true.

What she had with Reed was something she wouldn't trade, the emotional intimacy they had achieved infinitely more satisfying than any other relationship had ever been.

Friendship, it seemed, was worth more than sex after all.

Her body agreed with the assessment, a slight spasm sending tendrils of lazy warmth over her, speeding the descent into sleep.

FORTY-FOUR

The clock above the nurses' station told Reed that it was even later than she'd thought. Her interview had run overtime, some of the questions had been thought provoking, and for the most part she'd enjoyed the experience. New England, in its typical fashion had forgotten the parts of the story that ran counter to their puritan sensibilities and instead seized on the Disney aspects of the situation.

She'd barely made it to the restaurant in time to pick up the cake they'd ordered to celebrate Rio's impending discharge. "Have ice cream cake—will travel." One nice thing about Maine in October—it was cold enough to keep frozen food frozen.

"Sorry I'm late." Absently, Reed dumped her jacket over the chair by the door.

An unfamiliar man was sitting in a chair, his back toward the door. Rio was playing with a video camera while Heidi and Geoff hammed it up and Jae supervised.

"Mum!" The camera was forgotten as the cake was spotted.

"Hey, kiddo."

"Ms. Lewis."

Reed straightened and turned at the salutation, freezing as she recognized the speaker.

"Look what Mr. Josiah brought. Meccano!" Rio held up a bright green plastic box, the metallic components of the building toy rattling against each other as he displayed his prize proudly.

Somehow she mustered a smile for her son. "Did you remember to say thank you?" Completely of their own accord, her eyes fixed on the slightly threadbare form of Josiah Bennett. The world could have exploded in that instant and she wouldn't have noticed, every fibre and shred of control she had was focused on trying to remain in the here and now.

Her heart was pounding against her ribcage, and Reed didn't feel like she could breathe. Something was being held out in her direction—a small packet covered with subdued paper, bound with a ribbon. Mechanically she accepted it, still fighting the rising feeling of panic. "Thank you."

It was dark and light all at once, and every breath had to be fought for. Echoes long subdued ran free around her head, and an eerie silence seemed to cushion her from the sounds in the room. Reality was no

longer what she could see and hear—it had become a mix of the moment and memory.

“I just wanted to say thank you.” Pale eyes peeked from bruised lids, evidence of the beating he had received still present. His skin was pale, the blanching due more to age and weariness than lack of sunlight.

“You’re welcome.” The words were coming out stilted, her thoughts refusing to order themselves.

Bennett looked between them and smiled weakly, before beginning to rise from the chair. “You take care of your mother, young man. Glad to see you’re well.” As he leaned forward to stand, his body hung briefly over the rumpled bed, dwarfing Rio.

Without warning the world rushed away, the people in the room becoming small and distant. Outside, in the twilight, an ambulance siren grew louder, completing the ancient image that had replaced reality.

Her face felt wet, but she didn’t think she was crying. *It couldn’t be. Not here, not now. This is the hospital, not the orphanage. And this is not Father Paul.*

“Reed?”

Eyes unfocused, she turned in the direction Jae’s voice had come from. An arm was draped across her shoulder and she flinched from the unexpected contact, before recognizing the director.

A cold cloth was pressed against her face, and Reed realized her nose was bleeding. Slowly, things normalized and she was able to breathe again. Steadier, she forced polite words to come, desperate to cover her lapse. “Stay. There’s plenty of cake, Mr. Bennett.”

Reed had no idea what flavour the cake was, every cell in her brain split between trying to figure out what was going on, and the need to keep anyone else from figuring it out first. People were laughing, and there was a parade of doctors and nurses in and out of the small room, each saying their good-byes before Rio was discharged in the morning to finish his long convalescence at home.

It could have been a Bergman film, missing only a dove perched in a corner. It had the same surreal quality, and Reed was sure that she was on the verge of some shattering epiphany, if only things would slow down enough to let her catch up. It was there—a palpable lump in her chest, tangible in the nervous fluttering of her stomach and the bright red blood that intermittently trickled from her nose.

All she had to do was hang on long enough to get to her hotel room. Rio laughed and Reed turned to see him triumphantly adjust a final bolt on what looked to be a damned good replica of a pod racer from the

new Star Wars movie.

The chime that marked the end of official visiting hours beeped, and the party broke up, Josiah once more rising to leave. Nervously she accompanied him to the door, not quite able to bring herself to meet his eyes. The old man turned awkwardly, stumbling as the motion brought them face to face in the hall and out of earshot of the others. "You didn't know before, did you?"

She hadn't—not until after she'd helped him. Not until the angry words and blows had filled the hall. "No." Reed examined that, realizing that she would have helped him anyway, that more than the need for a diversion had sparked her into action.

"And now that's all you see. You don't even know me, and you hate me."

"I don't hate you." Reed was sure of that much. She knew what hate felt like and this wasn't it. "I hate me." There it was, profound in its simple truth.

"Hate is the one emotion that is truly wasted, Ms. Lewis."

By the time she figured out what to say next, he was gone, presumably swallowed by the elevator.

"Hey." Jae's soft voice broke the solitude.

Reed blinked, gathering her wits. "Hey."

"Heidi and Geoff are going to tuck him in and stay for a bit. You look like you could use some fresh air."

The offer was clear, but Reed shook her head no. Whatever was going on, Jae was a huge part of it, and she needed to think without the younger woman's distracting presence. "Rain check?"

Jae looked like she wanted to say something, but instead dug into one of the huge pockets on her tan cargo pants, pulling out a small pad of paper. A pen was whipped from its resting-place on the V-neck of the director's blue sweater. With precise strokes, words were placed on the sheet, which was then ripped from the pad. "One rain check. No expiration date."

Carefully Reed tucked the folded note into her front pocket. "Thanks." Jae seemed to know when to push and when to back off, though she had to admit, she didn't always initially agree with the director in the heat of the moment. She waved, then set off for the stairs, and one of the back exits that would dump her outside next to the river.

Hands shoved deep in her pockets, she played with the edges of the note and finally pulled it out, curiosity overcoming her.

1-213-555-1701

P.S. Check your fridge.

Smiling, she tucked it safely away for later.

* * *

Hours later she was no closer to sorting out the mess. Half a life spent burying her feelings had left her ill prepared for the kind of introspection she was being forced into now. It used to be easy. She'd decided on a cold November morning who and what she hated and simply gone on from there. But her safe haven of hatred had collapsed, real people making it impossible to maintain the broad anger. Jae, Holly and now Josiah had stepped out of the convenient mold, turning her worldview on its ear.

The time for hiding from the truth was over, and what had happened—or almost happened, at the wedding—made continued inaction impossible. *Question is ... are you big enough to do something about it?*

She looked at herself in the large mirror that all but dominated one wall of the room. "All right. Let's think this through." Absently she swallowed another mouthful of ice cream, unconscious of the smile that flitted over her features as the vanilla flavour of Jae's gift exploded over her taste buds despite her philosophical preoccupation.

Chasing the first spoonful with yet another, she continued to talk to herself, meeting her reflection's eyes steadily. "Is Jae a pervert? A little weird about some stuff—but no—put her down in the non-whack job category. Holly? Dangerous, but not a pervert." The screenwriter projected a benign image to the world at large, but she had a dangerous sense of humour along with razor sharp intelligence. Questionable taste in breakfast foods, but definitely someone she had time for.

Would she have time for me now? That was an unexplored option. For the first time she had choices—more than one friend. At least she thought they were friends. Well, the damn woman had her phone number and address plastered across the web, so a phone call might not be totally out of line.

Right and what the hell are you going to say? "Yo, Holly. I think I might have more than platonic feelings for my boss." Not the sort of thing she could say out loud, that was for sure.

And that begged the obvious question.

The reflection continued to stare back, familiar features taking on an

almost alien cast as she studied the angular planes and high cheekbones, trying to fathom her doppelganger's thoughts, even as she tried to reconcile the woman she saw with the woman she was.

And who is that?

I don't know anymore.

Don't you?

Somewhere Reed summoned up the courage to meet her own eyes and asked the only question that really mattered. Answering it proved a great deal more difficult.

One question, so many confusing possibilities. It didn't matter if Jae or Holly or if Santa Claus himself was a pervert. *It only matters if I am.* But that wasn't really the crux of the issue. Her growing feelings for Jae and what they portended were. And even then, the feelings weren't the whole issue either. What she felt for Heidi was love, so the emotional aspect wasn't entirely foreign, but, while the hugs, and occasional physical contact, were comforting, she didn't crave Heidi's touch the way she did Jae's. Hadn't ever craved anyone's touch that way.

No longer focused on her own image, she instead focused on the real question, her eyes locking on some invisible point that intersected nothingness and her own internal struggle.

Reed stared into that nothingness for a long time, weighing what she wanted against the probable consequences. But then everything had consequences—action and inaction alike. That was a lesson she'd learned the hard way. It was late, but Reed knew what she had to do, knew that maybe there was someone she could talk to after all.

* * *

The house wasn't hard to find, though it was virtually identical to the ones on either side, and she walked up the cedar chip path. Lobster traps leaned decorously against one another, the mesh supporting a tangle of plant growth. Faded orange buoys completed the stereotypical postcard Maine house landscaping, and she couldn't help but chuckle at the irony.

A soft glow came from the bay window and Reed peered inside, last minute hesitation stopping her hand before she could knock. Her eyes registered the scene as her body carried her forward through the door. It banged off the interior wall, causing the room's occupant to jump.

"Don't, please."

Josiah sat neatly dressed in an overstuffed chair, a clean suit laid out

on the chair to the left of the long couch that bordered the window, a revolver on the table in front of him, inches from his left hand.

"It's time, Reed." But his hand moved away from the dull black Browning.

It was then that she noticed the gilt frame off to the right of the gun. The picture wasn't visible from where she stood, but instinct told her that it was the Crosby half of the 'Bennett and Crosby' painted on the mailbox. She didn't know what to do or say. Reed gestured at a chessboard. "You play?"

"Chess was Holden's passion. He brought a set back from every place he'd ever been. I carved this set for his birthday. Do you play?"

"A little." Reed reached out a hand and moved a pawn to king four.

Josiah looked at her a minute and moved his own knight in response. "You'd best have a seat. These things tend to take a while."

Moves were exchanged, and somehow in between planning her strategy and trying to decipher his, she spilled the whole story. Spoke for the first time of seeing Will's sheet-shrouded body wheeled out of the dormitory. She wasn't entirely sure why, but she told him about Jae too.

"Check." Josiah moved his queen, cutting off the right-hand side of the board. "So are you afraid of being gay, or of what you think being gay means?"

"Were you?" She retreated and moved her king diagonally one space, realizing that at best she was prolonging the game.

"Terrified. Of both. I wasn't even sure what being gay meant." A rook joined the queen, blocking access to the other three quadrants. Pale eyes were turned upward to meet hers. "In the end I gave up trying to figure it out. It didn't matter."

"What did?" Desperate, she moved her remaining pawn, using it offensively in a last ditch effort to stave off the inevitable.

"Holden." A knight swooped across from where it had been benignly hiding, removing her pawn from play.

Reed reached across and with one tapered finger knocked over her king, conceding.

"In thirty years, that's the only game I ever won."

It was nothing like she had imagined, sitting here among the memories and artifacts of two lives. "I'm sorry." Reed let a tiny snort escape. "I've been doing that a lot lately."

"Losing at chess?" Grey eyes twinkled with humour and Josiah reset the board, fussing with the pieces until they were perfectly aligned.

"That too." This time she moved a pawn forward two spaces.

“Don’t know when to quit, do you?”

She slid the bishop out next. “I pick my battles.”

“Good idea, that.” He blocked her bishop with a pawn, which he promptly lost.

The queen floated nicely into place and they continued to play, this time in silence until she was able to say, “Checkmate.”

“So it is.” Once more the board was reset. “Keep playing? Or are you going to quit while you’re ahead?”

It would be the safe thing. “You go first this time.”

FORTY-FIVE

The couch beckoned and Jae stared at it reluctantly, only dropping onto its unwelcoming cushions because falling to the floor seemed like a much less pleasant option. Though, she allowed, not by much. The tan blanket was still bunched up where she'd left it the night before or was it the night before that? The two days since she'd returned from location had blurred together into one long day.

She didn't want to think about it, which, of course, meant that that was exactly what she was thinking about. Peering at the clock over her desk, Jae was able to read the small letters, eyes widening. *Tuesday? What happened to Monday?* Well, she certainly wouldn't get away with another all-nighter—Caitlynn would see to that. *Oh well, what Cait doesn't know can't get me lectured.*

Most likely the only thing that had kept the assistant director from swooping in and reading her the riot act already was the fact that she hadn't been due back until Tuesday. *Today*, she mentally corrected. Reed was due in tomorrow, and filming would pick up the following afternoon.

Tired past the point of being able to sleep, Jae toyed with the idea of driving home, while pulling the blanket firmly under her chin and wiggling to find the slight depression carved from a succession of late nights. A bright spot of light burned through her closed eyelids, the lamp positioned perfectly to make ignoring its glow impossible.

"I don't suppose you'd get that for me, would you?" Stone wings remained furled, the gargoyle dead to the world. There was a remote somewhere in the room that operated the lights, TV, VCR, CD player and coffeemaker, but it would take longer to move the piles of paper to look for it, than it would to get up and switch it off manually. Jae made sure the path back to the couch was relatively clear, rearranging a couple of the piles but not disturbing their overall order. One pile for each shooting day, thirty-seven in all, with four more yet to come. They were, ironically, under the number of shooting days originally scheduled, though two weeks behind in terms of the calendar, and were it not for the sudden change of locations and associated plane fares, they'd be well under budget too. Hopefully, Chambers would decide that, all things considered, it was as good as on time and under budget.

With a start, Jae realized that she had settled into her desk chair and was sketching the blocking for a scene she wanted to rework. Reed's

distinctive profile looked up at her, and she resisted the impulse to pick up the phone. The actress hadn't called, and Jae had respected the unspoken covenant, not pushing, though it hadn't stopped her from worrying about Rio and Reed's return.

A lot.

But either she trusted Reed or she didn't, and trust meant waiting.

Lack of sleep plus the emotional low, on top of what was shaping up to be a wicked case of PMS, caught her with a vengeance and her eyes blurred. Tired, Jae turned out the light and curled up on the couch in a ball, tightly cocooned within the ancient tan Scooby blanket, her entire body hidden in its fluffy, comforting depths. One last thought flitted through her consciousness before she drifted off. *Sometimes being a woman sucks.*

* * *

"Here."

A voice joined the aroma of coffee, both contributing to rouse Jae from a sleep that hadn't been nearly deep or long enough, marred as it had been by odd dreams. "Mmmrmph."

"If you'd rather, I could just inject the caffeine directly into your bloodstream. I used to be quite skilled with a needle."

Funny how, even in her dreams, Reed retained the laconic wit that bordered on the edge of eviscerating. Of course the fact that Jae could actually smell coffee lent some credence to the idea she wasn't really dreaming, and was in fact, very nearly awake. And if she was awake and the coffee was real, then the actress really was there, behaving exactly as she should. "Ever wonder if caffeine is like alcohol?"

"Other than the fact they're both drugs, and come in more concoctions than Methuselah had birthdays?" Reed sounded amused and Jae didn't need to open her eyes to see the smirk or tilted eyebrow.

Jae opened her eyes anyway, wanting to see if she was really awake. "Right. Besides that." You could get drunk just by holding alcohol in your mouth, and coffee seemed to imbue alertness without actual ingestion. *Now if Coke could catch on to that....*

"Nope." A grin came with the denial.

It was too early for this. The playful verbal jousting was just out of reach this morning. Cranky, Jae served up an uncharacteristically generous helping of blunt. "What are you doing here?"

The grin vanished. "You aren't being metaphorical are you?"

“No. I’m being ‘you are here a day early in my office at an ungodly hour of the morning’ literal.”

“I, uh, here.” Reed seated herself on the end of the couch closest to the door, holding out the crumpled rain check. “And by my watch it’s five a.m.—hardly ungodly.”

“Oh.” That took the wind right out of the sails of the S.S. Indignant and ran it aground. It was definitely too early to get into this, though. “Later, okay? I have a rule about coherent conversations and coffee—they must occur in alphabetical order.”

Reed nodded and passed over a cup of the steaming coffee. “Later then.” The tone didn’t hide the hurt that had flashed across her face.

Jae winced internally, aware that she was being unnecessarily short tempered. “Can we get a rewind? I’m sorry.”

There was a small ‘zzuuttt’ noise and Jae stifled a laugh as Reed painstakingly repeated her previous movements—only this time in reverse—before pausing mime-like at the threshold and re-entering the room. “Here.”

Laughing, Jae once again accepted the proffered coffee and patted the edge of the couch as she moved over slightly, making room for her friend. “Good morning.”

Reed instead motioned for her to lift her legs and slid in under them, back resting against the couch, feet stretched out in front. One hand patted the top of Jae’s thigh before coming to rest on her knee. “I bet you say that to all the ladies.”

“Only the ones smart enough to bribe me with coffee.” The hot drink settled nicely into her stomach and she settled back into the couch, which seemed a lot more comfortable than it had last night.

Except for the occasional soft whistling of air as Reed blew on her coffee, they were silent, at ease with each other despite the initial rough start to the day. Or maybe, she reflected, they had just reached a point where conflict didn’t equal being unfriends. *Unfriends? With a vocabulary like that, I need to stick to directing.*

A loud yawn broke the silence, and Jae lifted her head to see Reed stifle another one. *She must have come directly from the airport.* That thought warmed her more than the coffee had. The only reason for Reed to come to the studio at five a.m. with two cups of coffee on a day they weren’t filming was to see her. Which meant that the actress wasn’t avoiding or shutting her out after all.

“I have to assess the production cost report and adjust the script breakdown sheets to accommodate some extra shots I want to lay down

—both before lunch, so why don't you go grab some sleep, and we can talk later?"

Surprisingly, a brow was lifted in curiosity as Reed perked up, interest replacing fatigue. "Alternate angles of stuff we already shot—or new stuff?"

"Old stuff. I didn't handle the comedic aspects as well I wanted to, and I want to revisit part of it, just to be sure that I have enough to work with when we edit." That was the fine line she had to walk, the balance between shooting too much and too little—each was costly in its own way.

"I don't think it was just you." The wry admission was accompanied by an apologetic grin.

"Thanks, I think." Jae smiled to reinforce that she was teasing, feeling better now that she'd finished the coffee.

"Seriously, part of it might have been unfamiliarity with the territory, but we were stiff too. We shot those pretty early on and were still awkward with each other, and it threw the timing off—forced it a bit. Actually, I was stiff. I bet the one we shoot to end filming goes better."

Jae listened, glad to be able to discuss it with someone. Michael was out because he tended to fawn a tad too much to provide useful insight, and Cait didn't understand the process. Reed understood the nuances and wasn't afraid to take responsibility for mistakes or to give praise when it was due.

"There is one scene I think we do need to reshoot part of." Reed looked down and her brow crinkled.

Intrigued, Jae swung her legs to the floor and sat up. The actress' insights and instincts had often proved right on target. In a way it had been uncanny, so deep was Reed into the role that it was like having Dar actually able to comment on how she'd behave. It also made it difficult to trust the mixed signals the actress gave off. "Which one?"

"It needs to end on a high note."

Was Reed blushing? Now she was definitely curious. Jae didn't think it was possible to make Reed blush. Bleed, maybe—but not blush. "I'm listening."

"You need to end on them together—a quiet moment, a little humour—some indication that they've survived, and fade out on them making love. Leave the audience with proof that it's solid."

The top popped off the cardboard cup, as she squeezed the sides, caught by surprise. Carefully Jae pushed the plastic lid back on. It was something she'd thought about, but discarded, having already exhausted

the amount of nude screen time that the nudity clause in Reed's contract allowed. "You'd be okay with that? I haven't got any room left in the budget for a body double—for either of you."

"I'd be less okay if you didn't make the kind of movie you want because I stood in your way. Let me talk to Gwen."

Reed sauntered from the room as if she hadn't just dropped the cinematic equivalent of an ACME boulder, and all Jae could do was grin. She picked up the notes to the last scene left to shoot and reviewed the blocking and angles she wanted. *Strike that—second to last scene.*

And what a doozy it would be too, if the mental images running through her brain were any indication.

* * *

"That's good," Reed said.

Jae nodded to herself, watching through the camera monitor as Reed smiled slightly. *Perfect—so far, so good.*

"Mm.... Yes, I was glad to see it. I also ran an analysis for hormones and other anomalies, and I think I may have figured out what your little forgetfulness problem is." It had been hard to find a character actor who could convey fatherly concern and teasing camaraderie at the same time, and who was willing to work for peanuts. Damon Wiggins had read for the part—the aging action star willing to take a risk along with a pay cut to revamp his career—and so she'd added him to her little crew of misfits.

Reed sat up and cocked her head. "Yes?"

"Yes." The actor playing Dr. Steve paused, then nodded solemnly. "I'm afraid you have elevated levels of endorphins in your bloodstream, my friend. Especially oxytocin."

This is where the scene usually began to fall apart, and Jae held the fingers of one hand crossed tightly as she listened to Reed deliver the next lines. "Oh. What is that? What causes it?"

"Well, it's a naturally occurring hormone. It basically is one of the things responsible for feeling good. Your body releases it under certain circumstances, and it's known to produce the symptoms you're describing."

Reed pretended to consider the information. There was nothing wrong with the actress' delivery or mannerisms; she was delivering exactly what she'd been asked for. "What circumstances?" In a perfect blend, alarm was mixed with curiosity.

"Mmm, in some cases, exercise ... especially long distance running. Do you do that?" Even Damon was doing a credible job as the doctor. Jae just wished she could shake the feeling that they were losing something in the translation from paper to celluloid.

Reed shrugged. "Six, eight miles in a morning."

"Did you do that this morning?"

There was a subtle shake of the actress' head, and Jae grinned to herself as the characteristic furrow that decorated Reed's brow when she was thinking appeared—entirely appropriate for the character. "I... No." More hesitation. "Not this morning."

"Not that, then." Damon steepled his fingers. "You take any opiates?"

"What?" Reed's brow contracted sharply, anger superseding the thoughtful crease. "Steve, you goddamn well know better."

This was where they'd lost it before, the delicate balance of absurdity and humour that was supposed to be mixed with serious anticipation somehow never really came through. *It was supposed to be a comedic scene, right?*

Damon raised both hands, changing the script slightly, but that was the least of her problems. "Okay, okay—just asking." A tiny grin chased itself around his lips. "That eliminates two of the three most common causes."

"What's the third?" Reed chuckled, setting up for the punchline. "Eating chocolate?"

"Falling in love," Damon quietly replied. "Oxytocin is the hormone that stimulates the need for touching."

Reed simply stared at him, her jaw sagging slightly, and blinked her eyes, understating the magnitude of the announcement perfectly. "That's, ah, no, Steve, I don't." Reed ran a hand through her hair, this time adding one of Jae's own mannerisms to Dar's character. "That's not...."

"Dar, relax." Damon leaned forward. "Breathe, okay? I don't want you keeling over in my office, it looks bad for the nurses. My God, you'd think I just said you were pregnant or something ... there's nothing wrong with being in love. It's good for you." The words were capped by a fond smile.

"But I'm, are you...? Is that all, Dr. Steve?" Jae wondered what well Reed was drawing on for the stumbling confusion.

"Sure." Damon gazed at the actress, projecting quiet compassion. "Go take a walk, Dar—get some air. You're white as a sheet."

Reed nodded absently, and walked through the doorway.

“Pan right, follow her—and cut.” It was still off, and she was about ready to scream in frustration. The problem was she didn’t get the scene as written—it didn’t make sense to her, so how could she capture it? *I can’t*. “I don’t get it,” she muttered to no one in particular. Was it supposed to be comedy or not?

“Get what?” Cait asked, handing over the shooting notes.

“This scene. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Holly leaned across from her place next to Cait. “What doesn’t make sense?”

“This. How can Dar not know? I mean, a doctor? She needs a doctor to tell her she’s in love?” It had made her laugh aloud when she’d read the novel itself, but for reasons completely inimical to what she needed to film.

“You mean how can anyone not notice when someone makes them smile just by entering a room, inspires them to out of character behavior or when two people seem totally inseparable?”

“Exactly. No one is that blind.”

Holly looked at Cait before replying. “It wasn’t blindness so much as a bone deep belief that love wasn’t for her. That it was something she wasn’t entitled to or capable of. She’d never felt it before and so could not recognize it. Not much she could do to rationalize away scientific evidence.”

“Sorry, what was that again?” Jae turned her body to face the writer and away from Reed’s distracting presence.

“She said that Dar wasn’t blind—just a little battered and disbelieving,” the AD supplied, dark eyes lingering on Jae’s.

The air was pregnant, and Jae was uncomfortably aware that they were staring at her expectantly. “What?”

“Nothing,” came the simultaneous response as Cait and Holly walked away, heads shaking.

“That was weird.” Jae shrugged it off and turned back to see if the set had been readied for the next take yet. She signaled an assistant and raised her chair, ready to begin as soon as everything was in place again.

FORTY-SIX

“Cut and print.” Everyone froze and looked up at her. Jae held the moment slightly, drawing out the words they waited to hear. “We nailed it guys—that’s a wrap.”

It’s over—the long weeks of filming—the tightrope dance with budgets and schedules is over.

Before she could catch her mental breath, she heard the unmistakable sound of a cork popping. “Cait! No!” She ducked, knowing it was futile. Champagne sprayed over her, dousing her shirt, running down the valley between her breasts and into her shorts. Another blast hit from behind, and she looked over to see Reed shaking a bottle as the actress readied a second blast. Movement from the left drew her attention to Gwen, who, it seemed, was also part of what had to be a pre-planned plot, though the blonde actress was still struggling with the wire cage trapping the cork.

Jae gave up as Michael, along with various other members of the crew, produced bottles of their own from various hiding places, and held her arms out to the side, presenting a smiling target. Thoroughly soaked in the most expensive ammunition she’d ever played with, Jae caught the gaze of a smiling Reed. Blue pools flickered slightly to her left, a wicked grin tipping the director that the actress was up to something.

Jae followed the actress’ line of sight and spotted Reed’s target.

Laughing, she liberated a champagne bottle from Cait, and in silent collusion moved around to create crossfire for Reed. The actress winked, and they slipped silently into place or at least as stealthily as a half-naked actress and the primary target of the liquid firing squad could go.

They were lucky, and by the time Holly realized what was about to happen, Reed had nailed the brunette with an extended spray of champagne.

Reed leaned the bottle jauntily against one hip, looking extremely self-satisfied. “Yo, Holly!”

“Yo, Reed!”

The actress never saw it coming. The scriptwriter arced a return volley of her own, thumb expertly tucked across the top of the bottle increasing the pressure, and soaked the actress.

The war was on.

Jae lost track of whom she was aiming at and who—as well as how many—were firing at her.

Cait had champagne dripping from her nose, and Michael had shed his shirt. Waterguns had materialized from somewhere, and soon they were ducking in and out of the sets, hiding behind fake walls and scaled down furniture.

Teams began to form, coalescing along familiar lines, and Jae found herself back to back with Reed as they fended off some of the technical crew to one side, Holly and her girlfriend Sam on the other, while Cait, Thom, and Gwen advanced from the front.

"We're doomed." Jae shook her bottle again trying to generate pressure, but she was nearly out of ammo.

Reed looked at her thoughtfully, and Jae swore she could see the wheels turning. "Not necessarily."

"You have a plan? Because now would be a good time for a plan." Jae ducked a blast from Thom's water cannon, flinching as the cold water splashed off the wall and onto the back of her neck.

The actress feinted to the left, then swung her bottle around, nailing her co-star squarely in the chest. "When I say 'run'—duck between Cait and Holly."

"That's your plan? Run?"

"Rule number one—if you're outnumbered, run."

"What's rule two?"

"If you're almost out of ammunition, run. And since both apply, run. Now!"

Jae did as she was told, more than a little surprised at how easily she was able to get by their adversaries. Breathless, she ducked around the corner of what had been Kerry's living room and flopped onto the couch.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God." The exclamation flew from her mouth, and she thought her eyes were going to follow suit and land on the floor.

Reed sauntered cockily around the corner of the flat, the fitted half-sheet she had been wearing while filming the final love scene in one hand and a champagne bottle in the other, her state of deshabelle evidently having accounted for the ease of their escape. "What? It's not like you haven't seen me without my clothes on before."

Jae took the bottle from Reed and watched while the actress replaced the sheet around her torso and fastened the snaps that kept the sheet closed during filming.

"Now I know how you avoided panty lines." *Oh, good one. This year's award for stupid comments goes to ... Jae Cavanaugh.* Jae took a swallow

from the bottle, swirling the slightly flat, warm champagne around her suddenly parched mouth before finally swallowing it. "That's not helping much." She pointed at the sheet, which a thorough soaking had rendered nearly transparent.

Reed moved forward, merely inches from straddling Jae's outstretched legs, and took back the bottle, drinking. "You object?"

Danger, Will Robinson. Danger. Her mental alarm bell rang—giving ample warning—which she promptly ignored. "No objection." Deliberately, she let her eyes roam slowly over Reed's body, careful not to linger over any one spot too long. "None at all."

"Good."

The bottle was passed back and Jae drank, though how she avoided choking she wasn't sure. *Is she flirting with me?* Reed still hadn't moved, so she passed the remaining alcohol back, and watched as the actress drained the bottle. "Where's everyone else?" She'd half expected the others to thunder in after them.

"Holly, Sam, Waters, and Gwen took advantage of the momentary lapse of attention in the men to gang up on them. I don't think Waters appreciated her fiancé's wandering eye. Come to think of it, about the only one who wasn't shocked to immobility was Holly."

The image of a stunned Thom ogling the actress left her laughing so hard she started to snort, which set Reed off.

This was probably the most relaxed she'd ever been at the close of filming—usually she was exhausted. But then, lots had changed during filming. She'd changed. For once in her life she'd put something ahead of making movies, put someone ahead of her job. It had been touch and go, but they'd made it.

Not even Cait could make her laugh like that. It was one of the things she loved about Reed, the quirky humour that was usually carefully hidden, often delivered with a deadpan expression that only the slight curve to her lips betrayed.

Her eyes widened, and Jae thought her heart had stopped. If someone had tied a clue to a brick and chucked it at her, it couldn't have hit any harder.

"You okay, Tigger?"

I love you. "I'm fine, Roo." For a split second, she wasn't sure which one she'd said out loud.

"Good. I'd hate to lose you this early in the evening. C'mon, your crowning awaits."

"Do I have to?"

“Let’s see,” Reed held her fingers to her forehead, like she was trying to predict the future. “Lead Actress, Director Skip Cast Party. Yeah, I think they’d notice.”

Jae looked over at the actress. “Y’think?”

“As little as possible,” Reed deadpanned, getting up from her spot on the couch where she’d collapsed laughing earlier.

“All right. I surrender.”

They made their way back to the main catering area where a water balloon fight had erupted. It was total chaos and by tradition, decorum had been completely chucked out along with most of the clothing of the participants, as latex splattered against people and props, drenching everything.

* * *

The party was in full swing, the bulk of the sets dismantled, and almost all of the water from the earlier contest had been sopped up. Music rumbled from the large speakers that the sound crew had wired onto a makeshift stage, and various members of the special effects crew had jerry-rigged a light show of sorts.

From her vantage point behind a pillar, Reed could see Jae laughing, delicate fingers fiddling with the tuning pegs as she tamed the guitar before beginning to play. Her glass was empty and she ventured forth in search of a refill. On the stage, Gwen and Cait were hamming it up as Jae and the impromptu band played. It wasn’t quite karaoke, but close.

Jae finished with a flourish and they collapsed laughing, as the crowd applauded and stomped. Several songs and beers later they stumbled down, putting the instruments to rest.

Reed accepted a drink thrust at her and drained it, her throat parched from laughing. “That was awful.”

“Yes. But fun.”

“Definitely.” Reed snaked an arm out and caught the director as Jae stumbled, then left her hand in place, guiding them toward an empty couch. Alcohol had fuzzed her brain more than she would have liked, and she was hyperaware of the body next to hers.

Jae’s nose crinkled in thought, and Reed tried not to grin.

“What?”

“You are such a dweeb.” Reed let the smile show and affectionately ruffled the director’s hair.

“Dweeb? You come into my house, and insult me?” Jae did an

uncanny impersonation of DeNiro.

"If it helps, you are my dweeb."

"Am I?" The question was spoken softly.

The tension they had been playing with jokingly for weeks suddenly boiled over, propelled by the heat added during the champagne fight. Reed swallowed, then swallowed again. "Yes."

Around them the party ebbed and flowed, guests and crew drifting in and out of Dar's sunken living room, in some pattern that only Nostradamus could have interpreted. It was quiet around them though, noise and laughter not penetrating the insulated little world they'd just created. Neither of them broke the spell, and they just sat, aware of the significance of what had just happened, equally unsure of what was next.

Casting another sidelong glance at Jae, Reed tried to figure out what the director was thinking. Foam from the draft beer rested on the fine hairs above Jae's top lip, and without thought Reed gently wiped it away with her thumb, letting her hand linger.

Jae turned her head inward slightly. Warm breath kissed Reed's palm and ran through her body like an electric shock. Before her mind could thwart her body's intent, she leaned forward and replaced the touch of her thumb with a kiss.

It was a jumble of sensations and feelings—fear, excitement, curiosity, desire—soft lips gave under hers, tentative and daring all at once. A muffled sigh reached her ears, waking her from the sensuality of the experience to the reality of what she had done.

The emotions tying her in knots were far more complex than the simple kiss that changed her whole world. It wasn't the first time they'd kissed—or even the second—but it was a completely new experience, and the hedonist in her reveled in the gentle give and take as they explored each other.

She had no idea who pulled back first, aware only that they were staring at each other and that she couldn't tear her eyes away from Jae's. Hardly daring to breathe, she waited to see if she had gone too far, let her impulsiveness ruin a friendship.

"C'mon." Jae stood and held out her hand. "We need to get that taken care of."

It was only then that Reed realized her nose was bleeding.

"Hey, it's okay. It's sort of cute."

Numbly she followed Jae out of the cavernous soundstage and into the cold desert air. The chilly blast served only to highlight the lingering

heat where their bodies had come together. As they walked she had time to second-guess what she had done, though she still had no clue what had possessed her to actually do it. There was no clue in Jae's movements as to how the director felt about what had transpired.

Somehow they were at her trailer and then inside. Confused and feeling lost, she grabbed a towel from the rack separating the bedroom from the bathroom and viciously wiped at her nose. "I'm sorry."

The cloth was taken away. "Shhh. Let me," Jae whispered, then reinforced the words with gentle motions of her hands as the last trickle of blood was dabbed away.

Butterfly kisses to the tip of her nose replaced the cloth and Reed tilted her head, allowing another kiss.

What do I do now? The mechanics she understood, having read too much not to be aware of how things were supposed to work. Reed just wasn't sure what she was allowed to do. She knew what she wanted to do.

She wanted to kiss Jae again. The desire must have telegraphed itself to her partner, and they kissed again, less tentative this time, and when Reed felt the gentle pressure of a tongue against her lips she opened in response. Suddenly it seemed she was having difficulty breathing, and she pulled back slightly.

The motion didn't deter Jae, lips tracing a path to the soft skin of her neck, and Reed wondered if the other woman could feel how hard her heart was beating. A thumb brushed over the material of her shirt, the thin cloth transmitting the touch directly to the skin below.

If she needed any concrete proof that she was aroused, Reed had it, as her nipples rubbed painfully against the rough cotton. With Jae's head bent, there wasn't much of the woman she could reach, so Reed lifted one hand to play with the hair on the back of Jae's neck. *She needs a haircut.*

Bolder, she let her hands play over the finely muscled shoulders, then further down to the slight dip of the small of Jae's back. She wanted to go further, but wasn't entirely sure she hadn't gone too far already. Funny how you could be scared shitless and feel perfectly safe.

Reed felt a deft touch to the skin of her tummy as Jae explored the area below her breasts, never quite touching them, causing her to arch slightly in response. Her skin tingled in places Jae hadn't even touched yet, anticipation doing as much to kindle a response as the caresses. She was trembling, unable to tell how much of it was fear, and how much desire, or outright panic. *What if I can't do this?* They'd pretty much

covered everything she had any experience doing, and she was fast being pulled light-years from her comfort zone. Surreptitiously, she lifted a finger to her nose, afraid that she might be bleeding again, and was relieved to find it dry.

Under her fingers Jae could feel the quiver of the tight muscles that framed Reed's abdomen. Every pass of her nails generated a response. She just wished she knew if it was desire or stark terror causing it.

"Look at me." She propped herself against the cushions on one elbow. "I want to hear you say something."

Confusion was plain on Reed's face, but there was an affirmative nod.

"I want to hear you say no." With her free hand, she nudged a lock of dark hair back into place, letting her fingers linger on the strong jaw of her friend.

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't—and that's why." How could she explain without hurting Reed? "I need to know that you know that you can say no." The furrowed brow she received in response helped her clarify the rest of what niggled at the edge of her awareness. Reed was drunk. "And I think I need to know that you're sober enough to know what's happening."

"You don't wa—"

"No, I want you." To prove it she leaned forward and nibbled lightly on Reed's lips until they parted in response, then deepened the kiss, before reluctantly pulling away. "More than you know. But what I want more is your friendship."

"So you aren't going to sleep with me because you like me?"

That was one way of looking at it. "Yes. And to be perfectly honest, I'd like to be more than a drunken experiment." *And I want to know that I'm sleeping with Reed, not Dar.* But she didn't say that.

"So you're after repeatable results?"

The quirky humour she loved had surfaced again, along with the low throaty drawl that almost made her forget why she was saying no. "Something like that." She could see Reed mustering her courage, determination settling over chiseled features. It was like a decision had been made, a goal set, and it made her uncomfortable. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't know." The admission was subdued.

Treading carefully, Jae reached a hand out and softly stroked a cheek before taking one of Reed's hands in her own. "When you can answer that, then we can try this again."

The hand was pulled away and Reed sat up, arms tucked protectively across her chest. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that she was upset. "Are you always so fucking noble?"

"No." And she wasn't, either. She'd had her share of flings, comfortable with her sexuality and physical desires.

"Then let me worry about me."

Obviously, in trying to explain on rational grounds, she'd missed something.

"Is this honestly how you want it to happen? A drunken quickie in a movie trailer? 'Cause this isn't how I'd pictured it." No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she realized what she'd just confessed.

Instead of the anticipated accusations of planned seductions, a shy smile appeared. "You thought about it." Wonder filled the statement, and some of the edgy tension that Reed had been radiating disappeared.

Jae realized the inadvertent admission had been a type of reassurance that her earlier words had failed to provide. By having fantasized about the circumstances, she was confirming in a very real way her desires. "A lot. You haven't been helping lately, either." That was an understatement.

"Fireplace? Shower? Beach? Hot tub? Cave?" Reed was smiling, ticking off clichés.

Jae wondered if the other woman realized that she was revealing a few things about herself with the list. "I don't know exactly." There was no way she was going to admit to the unfettered physicality of some of her fantasies. "I was hoping for more than two or three hours. And I could do without the PMS." Romantic it wasn't. But it was the truth. As much as she wanted to make love, Jae wasn't sure she was up to it—even if Reed didn't have to leave for the airport at five in the morning.

"Guess that explains why you've been such a cranky bear all week." One finger poked at Jae's stomach, a light tickle that bordered on a tentative caress. "You want it to be perfect."

"I don't want it to be perfect. I just want it to be right." She knew she'd finally found the right words to explain what she was feeling, as she was rewarded with a genuine smile.

Reed leaned back against the cushions. The last vestiges of the tension that had been plainly visible on the lanky frame had vanished. A hopeful glance was cast in her direction. "Can I kiss you again?" A flush crept upward from the open neckline of the sleeveless shirt. "I liked that part."

It was charming, and Jae felt an indulgent smile forming. Boldness

and a surprising naiveté mixed with jaded cynicism, all tempered by an adventurousness of spirit—it was a magnetic mix and she leaned forward, complying. “I liked that part too.”

And this time it was just a kiss. Freed from performance anxiety, she gave herself up to the sensations, amazed to discover that in spite of her experience, some things were still brand new.

FORTY-SEVEN

Black and ominous, it might as well have been a spider as a telephone, because she couldn't make herself reach out and pick up the receiver.

"What are you looking at, hunh?" Jae glared at the gargoyle, daring it to laugh. Prudently, it did not and she reached out, affectionately scratching the tuft of yellowish fake fur that stuck up from the top of its stone head. *The ideal pet for a negligent workaholic.* With a wry grin, she lifted the notepad from her desk onto her lap, the pathetically empty page belying the previous thought; she'd gotten absolutely no work done this morning.

And without knowing where she stood with Reed, Jae very much doubted she'd get any more done the rest of the day either. She'd tried. The larger-than-life-sized images had danced across the screen of the editing bay, mesmerizing her with the power she had. A flick of a switch, a cut here, a cut there, change this angle, overlay that shot—it had been intoxicating—she could make Reed do anything she wanted. And in the end, she had been unable to make the actress do anything at all, abandoning the editing bay for notepads and shot reports, afraid that she'd let the line between Reed and Dar blur in a haze of wishful thinking. *If it's this hard for me, how are you coping?* They'd needed more time, and there just wasn't any. No time to sort out the tangle of feelings or the implications of what they had done.

There was time. *How long does it take to say 'I love you'?*

She was still sitting there, thinking, when the door opened, the hinge creaking, once again in need of oil.

"You look like shit." Cait set the carryout tray on the desk, then lifted the plastic cover from her own steaming cup, letting it cool.

"I love you, too." The sarcastic words spilled out with a lack of self-consciousness that only served to highlight her cowardice in not saying them to Reed.

Annoyingly cheerful, Cait blew her a kiss, Monroe-like. "I know."

Jae picked up her coffee, taking a second to enjoy the mix of eggnog and nutmeg that wrapped around the stronger aroma of the dark roast, complementing it perfectly. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me. Read the card."

Card? There it was, tucked in the center. She'd assumed it was a receipt or charge slip, and hadn't given the folded square a second thought. Keeping her eyes averted, sure she was blushing, Jae opened

the small envelope and slid the card out.

Because 'C' comes before 'E',

R

It was Cait's handwriting, but the sentiment and style were unquestionably Reed's.

* * *

"Lewis residence, Rio speaking."

Reed looked up, the pieces of the Meccano building toy frozen on their way to being joined to the body of the car they were building. *It was about the right time.*

"We're building a car, and it has a motor and everything, and mum said we could race it in the barn 'cause it's bigger and there's more room." The words tumbled out in breathless excitement. "I'm going to set the camera up and see if I can make it look real, well except that the pieces are all sorts of colours."

He paused, looking thoughtful, head cocked to one side, listening. It had to be Jae.

"Cool." Rio was grinning from ear to ear, and she wondered what tip the director had given him. "Mum's right here." He giggled. "Yes, she's behaving herself."

Here it was. Reed felt the adrenaline rush through her body, and her stomach tensed in response. She'd left the director sleeping when she'd gone to the airport, intending to call as soon as she got home, but it hadn't been that easy.

What had seemed simple and heady in the predawn hours had become unbearably complicated in the morning light. It was easier to do than to think.

"Mum?"

"Sorry. Thanks." She took the receiver, holding one hand over the mouthpiece. "Can you do me a favour?"

"Sure." He hopped down from the stool.

"Go make sure that Aunt Heidi doesn't need the barn this afternoon."

"Kay."

Reed waited until he'd headed for the entryway and his boots before speaking. "Hello."

"Hey."

It was only one word, barely breathed, but Reed realized that Jae was

as scared as she was. "I don't think Waters is very fond of me."

Jae laughed, and the little ball of tension that had taken over her body relaxed its hold. "Nah. You just mess up her neat little schedules. That, and I gather you phoned her at six in the morning."

"Guilty. I didn't think it was fair to unleash you on an unsuspecting editing bay without a shot of caffeine." Now that the film was over, would they have anything to talk about?

"Then I'll have to think of a suitable punishment."

"Should I run?"

"Do you want to?"

Things took an abruptly serious turn, but couched in ambiguous enough language that they could both save face and pretend that nothing had ever happened.

There'd been too much pretense in her life already. "No." Reed paused, digging deep for the words, being as honest as possible. "But I don't know if I'm ready to be caught, either."

"Me either." There were muted voices coming through the line, and Jae asked someone to wait a minute. "I have to go. Talk to you later?"

"Definitely."

"And Reed?" Jae hesitated.

"Yeah?" Her stomach fluttered.

"I miss you. A lot."

The flutter increased, spreading warmth in its wake. "I miss you, too." Reed hung up and tugged on her boots, oblivious to the fact she was singing to herself.

Slightly off-key words hung over the freshly fallen snow as she made her way to the barn, equally unaware of an amused Heidi watching from the paddock.

* * *

"Well? What do you think?"

Reed used her mouse to drag the status bar and reset the clip. "I think you don't like it." She turned the sound down and replayed the footage.

"That bad?" The director sounded defeated.

"No. It's good. But you don't like it. How come?"

"I don't know," Jae snapped back.

Reed took a breath. Talking to Jae when she was frustrated was a lot like helping Rio with his math homework. "Yes, you do. What are you seeing that no one else can?"

There was silence, and she could tell that Jae was replaying the scene again. The silence stretched out, only the intermittent clicks and soft whirring noises indicating that the footage was being replayed over and over again.

The first time Jae had asked her to look at a section of the film, she'd been surprised. It had taken a couple of times before she'd figured out when Jae wanted advice, or simply confirmation of what she already knew. Today was different. Reed sensed that Jae was truly frustrated, unable to put into words what her intuition and instincts were saying.

"The camera," Jae said suddenly. "I can see the camera. It's there in the room." The frustration had become elation.

Reed replayed the scene. Now that Jae had put a name to it, she could see it too.

"Thanks, Reed."

There were sharp clicks and more whirring noises, then the phone went dead. Jae was back in 'focus' mode. Bemused, Reed let the "you're welcome" fall into the phone, knowing that even without the live connection Jae heard them.

* * *

"A little to the left. Higher. A little higher," Jae directed.

Reed brushed aside a heavily needled branch. "If this gets any higher it won't even be on the tree."

"Ha ha. Left. Lower. Perfect."

"Are you sure?" Her height allowed her easy access to the upper reaches of the pine.

"Yes. Now we need some blue ones—for balance."

Hiding her smile, Reed obligingly dug through the battered wicker chest and retrieved a box of the fragile blue glass bulbs, quickly verifying that they all had metal hooks. For some reason the little silver hooks went missing in numbers that grew exponentially from year to year—no matter how many you bought. The top had broken on one, its jagged edge glinting under the glow of the white Christmas lights already strung on the pine. She gingerly threw it in the trash can, perversely enjoying the tinkling noise.

"Now there's an odd number."

"Actually there was an odd number to start with—they come in boxes of nine. Rio broke one last year trying to get his truck out from under the tree. So we have seven of nine—an odd number." Reed took a sip of

her mulled wine, the subtle interplay of the mead with the raspberry wine creating a burst of flavour that made it easy to forget how potent the drink was.

Mischievously, she began to haphazardly scatter the ornaments over the face of the tree. *One, two ... three.*

On cue, Jae cut in. "You're putting them too close together."

"Tell me something, Tigger. Are you always this anal, or are you channeling Piglet for a reason?" She lifted her eyebrow and let a small grin show.

"Oh God. I'm channeling my mother."

Reed nearly burst out laughing at the horror evident on Jae's face. If Saint Nick himself had arrived in a puff of soot, she doubted that the blonde would look any more shocked than she did now.

Jae looked up, subdued. "It was awful. She'd order Dad all over the living room, making him adjust things until they were perfect. She'd even divvy up the bulbs into neat little piles beforehand. We'd put them up and Mother'd come along behind us, moving them around. The tree always looked gorgeous."

"Well then, just think of this as the first Christmas of the rest of your life." Reed reached into the chest and pulled out a finely detailed wooden pony, its green rockers and tiny reins an exact copy of the larger horse in Rio's room.

"Close your eyes." Reed waited until she saw Jae's eyes close. "Now give me directions."

"Left. Up. There."

Reed carefully hung the pony on the branch, cheating a little to make sure it wasn't too close to a neighboring red bulb. "Again."

"Down, down ... around the side, there."

Again she hung an ornament, this time placing the porcelain bear in front of a light, making it glow softly. "Again."

Soon she didn't need to say "again," and Jae would just say "there" every once in a while, her eyes still closed, a contented smile complementing the relaxed way she was sprawled on the rug. Reed smiled and turned the light out, letting the soft glow from the tree fill the room.

"You can open them now."

Silence.

"Jae?"

"It's beautiful."

"So are you." The quiet words broadened Jae's smile and Reed let

their eyes meet in unstrained awareness, enjoying the simple connection, holding it between them and not quite letting it go, even when the sudden skipping of the Christmas album made them look away.

"Let me guess. A favorite?" Jae asked, smiling.

It was. Heidi had found the compilation in a second hand store down Calais way, and together with Rio they had worn a groove in the vinyl.

The clock chimed, the heavy brass knockers sounding the hour.

"I have to go," Jae said.

"I know." Every day they talked, sometimes about the film, but mostly about nothing at all, the conversations lingering far into the night, and more often than not, well into the morning. Not tonight, though. "I wish you were here."

"Me too."

"Next year."

"It's a date. Merry Christmas, Reed."

"Happy Christmas, Jae. Drive carefully." The monitor flickered, and the screen went blank, the direct video feed shut off. After a second of wishful thinking, Reed turned the system off, watching as the green light on the hard drive went out.

* * *

Should I? Jae hesitated over the number. On the desk her credit card shone under the lamp, its hologram logo reflecting the light, winking. The clerk had said that she had until four p.m., and it was already a quarter to.

Giving Rio the computers from the film set for Christmas was one thing, but this was more. A lot more.

Since when? Busted by her own conscience, Jae looked at the calendar reflexively. It was the first time she'd remembered Valentine's Day without Cait's help in years, and the only time that marking the occasion carried such a huge risk.

Ten minutes had slipped by, ticked off unnoticed, and she picked up the phone. How Reed felt about her wasn't important, and the words were true, irrespective of context. So she'd say them.

She'd believe.

It was a good thing that she'd written Reed's address down, because her brains deserted her at the critical moment. The girl on the other end patiently waited for her to read the information.

“What would you like the card to say?”

Jae hesitated again. She wasn’t witty like Reed, the perfect turn of phrase eluded her. *Believe*. Her grandda’s voice echoed over her worries and she swallowed. “I love you.”

“Signature?” The girl sounded blasé, unaware of the momentous occasion. But that was life, really—a series of events that gripped you in their urgency and which passed unnoticed by others held in the grip of their own lives.

“No signature.”

It wouldn’t need one.

FORTY-EIGHT

It was raining—not unusual for Maine in the spring. Splashes lovingly cleaned the last evidence of winter from the landscape, and the unique aroma of trees in bloom crept through the spaces between the timbers of the cabin. Reed listened to the steady throb as the water beat against the roof and windows, waking slowly to the same rhythm that had lulled her to sleep where she sat, curled in a chair. Opening her eyes fully, she traced the spidery veins splayed across the glass, obscuring the world beyond.

Reed tucked the blanket around her hips, more for comfort than warmth, the small fire in the wood stove more than enough to ward off the chill. It had been a settled few months, her time divided unequally between Rio and the odd public appearance in support of *Tropical Storm*'s pending release. They'd had to adapt and it had taken some getting used to, but in the end things continued much as they had before.

Soft chimes rang the hour. It was time to decide. The invitation had come in its finely engraved envelope, bearing the director's distinctive signature and words that if they had come from anyone else would have seemed trite—"121 down, 10 to go." That had been nine and a half days ago.

The envelope now rested on top of the airplane ticket to Miami, which was in turn tucked under the small wooden box that contained a gift from Josiah and the card from a dozen roses. Nestled in the box, carefully encircling each of the two kings, were two rings, inscribed with five simple words: "Where you go, I go."

The box that she'd forgotten when she left his house had arrived three days after she returned from California, and when she'd finally been able to make herself open it, she'd found the simple red-gold bands, worn more on one side than the other. They weren't ornamental pieces brought out for show on special occasions. They were tangible symbols of something she had thought couldn't exist.

Something she thought she'd found.

The last words he'd spoken to her had echoed on that long flight to Los Angeles, but it had taken her a week to take the risk, and play. They drifted through her head again, and she could almost picture him sitting on his couch as he called out, after barely catching her before the door had swung shut. Could see him pointing at the board, where she'd lost

another game. “*Never be afraid to lose, but be terrified of never trying.*” So she’d tried.

And won, defeating the legacy of a lifetime of fear. That had turned out to be the easy part. More complicated was the realization that pursuing a relationship with Jae would mean accepting the label the media had already given her. Even more complicated was figuring out whether or not to bring a child into the mix.

She still had no answers for that one.

Reed poured another mug of coffee from the carafe idly resting on the raised hearth, the heavy clay enough to keep the contents piping hot. Light rapping on the window warned her that she had company. “In here.”

“You haven’t left yet?”

“Can’t put much by you.”

Heidi stuck her hands over top of the cast iron stove and briskly rubbed them together, using a combination of warmed air and friction to ease the chill. “Can’t decide what to wear?”

“Can’t decide whether or not to even go.” She left it at that, having never spoken to Heidi of the change in her relationship with Jae, or the things she had begun to learn about herself. Heidi knew she was seeing a counselor, but Reed had kept the details private.

The brunette crossed to the table, one finger sliding over the top of the box, before she pulled the tickets and invitation out. “I think you have. I think you made the decision months ago.”

Startled, Reed just stood there.

“Geoff and Rio are bringing the car around. Let’s get you packed.”

Packed. To go. Then she knew. She had to go. It had to be her this time. It had always been Jae. Jae who climbed balconies, Jae who flew across the country. This time—this time—it had to come from her, freely and without suasion.

She had the answer to Jae’s question.

* * *

Jae slid the straps onto her shoulders and took a last glance in the mirror. *I look like a candy cane.* Long hours in an editing bay over the winter had somewhat diminished her perennial tan, and the red dress clung to her frame, its brilliant hue a sharp contrast to her paler hair and eyes. She sighed. *Too late now to do anything about it.*

Tonight was the night. Opening night.

She ruffled her hair one last time, grateful that she'd at least remembered to get it cut, and left the room, heading for the lobby and the waiting limousine. The foyer was crowded, but Caitlynn and Gwen were easy to spot, sitting as they were in a group that included Thom, Holly and Samantha—the woman she presumed to be the writer's escort.

"Hey, Punkin."

"Daddy!" Jae threw her arms around her father, and let him wrap her in a bear hug.

"Your mother thought it would be a nice surprise. It's not every day one of your kids releases a big Hollywood picture."

She swallowed. "It's a surprise, Da. Definitely a surprise." Jae just hoped the content wouldn't prove to be an equally huge surprise to her parents.

Her father laughed before leaning down to kiss the top of her head. "We'll see you at the party later, if you can spare some time for yawr pawr kin." The twinkle in his eyes and the outrageous Appalachian accent let the director know she was being teased.

"I dunno, Paw, you'd better book a dance or two through Cait. She handles my scheduling." They had gotten to the table where the others were seated, and she squeezed into a seat that afforded her a clear view of everyone coming and going from the spacious lobby down below. "Where's Mother?"

"She needed a few extra minutes to finish dressing."

They both rolled their eyes, knowing that a few extra minutes could mean anywhere from five minutes to ninety and beyond.

Jae looked around. Her mother had arrived, joining those already gathered in the lounge. *Everyone's here. Almost everyone.* The strangest part was that no one had asked where Reed was—or at least no one had asked her. *Maybe she's just running late.* Still, she couldn't help but scan the crowd, just in case.

Jae put her disappointment aside and trailed Gwen and Holly out to the car. In a show of unity, director, lead actresses and author-screenwriter would arrive together. The others would arrive first in separate cars.

The ride itself passed quickly, her nerves blurring the sights and sounds, and suddenly they were there. The bright spotlights that swept the sky illuminated the theatre as they raked the edifice. Velveteen ropes cordoned off a pathway that led inside, and acted as a soft rampart, holding back the throng of people who had come to catch a

glimpse of Hollywood's bright lights.

Halfway down the carpeted pathway, she froze.

Reed.

At the end of the journey, Reed stood waiting, sheen of cobalt blue satin accentuating the darkness of her hair and the pale luminosity of her eyes.

She came.

Then everything stopped. There was no noise, no flashing bulbs of light, and the feel of the carpet beneath her feet faded away. *She came.*

Reed's smile was so small that anyone else would have missed it, but then again it wasn't aimed at anyone else. That smile was for her, and her alone.

Someone nudged her, and it was only then that she realized she had stopped. Putting one foot carefully in front of the other, she moved forward again, not daring to break eye contact, lest the other woman disappear, having not really been there at all, made real solely by a wish.

Standing and waiting for Jae to finish the long walk from the curb to the cinema was one of the hardest things Reed had ever had to do. Not because she wanted to bolt, but because she wanted to meet Jae halfway.

Reed stood her ground and just watched as the group made their way inside. Peripherally, she was aware that Holly and Gwen were flanking Jae, but she paid them no mind, mesmerized by the bright smile she received as Jae recognized she was there.

Lovely. She was sure there were other words, heaps of them, that could be combined better, but at that instant that was the one that fit. The red dress was a perfect contrast to the lighter features and paler skin of the blonde, the sheath clinging and moving in perfect time as well-muscled legs brought Jae closer.

Then she was there, and Reed stepped forward. She didn't think about it. If she had, the moment would have passed, another one lost, and she was determined not to lose any more. It was the barest brush of her lips to Jae's, then she shifted her path, letting her lips hover above a delicate ear. "Yes?"

There was a hitch in Jae's breathing. "Yes."

Their mouths came together, and if it wasn't perfect, it was right.

"Hey. You okay?" Tears were running down Jae's cheeks and Reed was worried. It hadn't been a sad movie. The first chance she'd gotten, she had slipped away from the press and well-wishers, acutely aware that Jae had disappeared from the private room in the restaurant.

"No."

She hesitated, unsure and unable to figure out what was wrong. The film had turned out beautifully, and Reed had been amazed at the view of herself she'd seen splashed across the screen. It had been her and yet wasn't her—and unlike other movies, by the fourth or fifth scene she'd even been able to forget she was watching herself—watching scenes she already knew the endings to. Jae had done a masterful job. Suddenly, it clicked. *Had done. Past tense.* For Reed the role had ended months ago, she'd already completed the process of picking Dar out of her psyche—not so Jae.

The director's end had come when the screen went dark and the house lights came up.

Reed pulled them into a dark corner. "Let it out."

And Jae did, the sobs wracking the director's body until Reed was sure that they'd tear her friend apart. When the director finally looked up, black lines streaked her face where mascara had run, obviously not quite waterproof enough.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Jae had held her enough times while she cried; in a strange way it felt good to be able to reciprocate.

Jae leaned against her again. "I can't believe it's over. Nine months. Gone."

"Not gone. Shared." She kissed Jae's forehead.

"It's going to be weird."

Reed smiled. "Weirder than us?"

There was a tiny hint of a smile around Jae's eyes. "I don't think that's possible."

"C'mon. We have two choices. I can lick a napkin and wipe the smudges off your face, or we can go back to your hotel and clean you up properly." There was a third choice. The restaurant they were holding the post screening party in had restrooms, but she'd had enough of people and Reed sensed that Jae had too.

"Ewww. You don't do that to Rio, do you?"

She didn't. But it had gotten Jae to smile, so it was worth it. "Yep. Big wads of spit-soaked napkins—even works on spaghetti."

"That is so gross." Jae gave her a sideways look, then started to laugh.

"You are such a liar."

"Busted."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." She leaned in slightly and let Jae kiss her again. Every nerve in her body was aware of the gentle pressure. Only the wall kept them from falling over, her body pinning Jae's smaller one to the wooden paneling.

"Hotel," Jae breathed out, the word ragged, partially swallowed by the kiss.

"Definitely." Reed could feel her breathing and heartbeat increase, refusing to stop the kiss, months of anticipation stoked past the boiling point.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She had never been more sure of anything in her life.

* * *

The morning after the night before.

The morning after.

Morning.

Reed worked her way into a lazy wakefulness, absorbing the last few hours, and tucking bits away for safekeeping. Jae's smile as the curtain fell and the crowd rose, applauding; the sound of her name whispered in the night; the utter sense of safety and simple joy that came from just thinking about moments to think about.

Every cliché about love and passion was threatening to float through her mind, and she still couldn't find a way to express how she felt. It had been a hell of a night. A wonderful night. One worth waiting for. Definitely worth repeating. With hope, one she'd repeat every night for the rest of her life.

It felt like her whole life had been leading to this one moment. One neverending moment. Giddy, she fought down the giggle that threatened escape. *Mushball. Total mushball.* For once she didn't argue with the inner voice, agreeing completely.

Under her ear, she could hear the steady rhythm kept by Jae's heart. Slow and even, it bespoke the same peaceful lassitude that held her in its grip. She never wanted to move. Her bladder had other ideas, body torn between its needs and its desires. Desire was winning.

She snuggled deeper, ignoring the start of the day for as long as possible. It was nice to be held. One hand tentatively rested above Jae's

navel, fingers playing with the edge of the depression. She wondered what would happen if she were to kiss the same spot that her thumb was lazily exploring. Or maybe, if she moved her neck a fraction and took one crinkled brown areola into her mouth, nipping gently with her teeth. Jae, it turned out liked to be bitten lightly. Nervous, she'd accidentally nipped the sensitive flesh with her teeth and had nearly panicked when Jae suddenly arched in response.

She smiled at the memory, her own body not nearly as reactive as her partner's. It was fairly demanding though, and she gave in, carefully untangling from her willing human mattress in order to pad off to the bathroom. *After all, there are no rules about how many times you can get up.*

Jae's perfume clung to her skin, the scent triggering another image from the night before. Radiant. That was the word she'd been looking for as she watched Jae make her way up the red carpet. *Radiant.*

She still looked radiant. For a minute Reed did nothing but watch Jae sleep, soaking in every detail. It had always been the other way around with Jae watching over her troubled slumber. A muted thud outside the hotel room door distracted her, and she listened for a moment. *Morning paper.*

Reed opened the door, not giving a damn about who might walk by, and scooped up the newspaper. With the heel of her left foot she shut the door, then unfolded the paper. Front page. Slow news day in Miami. *Ah. Local angle.*

"Is it bad?" Jae had woken, and was half sitting up, half reclining on her elbows.

If she hadn't heard the nervous fear in Jae's voice, she would have teased the director and maybe later she would. But not now. "It's a pretty good picture of Holly actually." Reed read the headline aloud. "Local Writer's Movie Takes City by Storm." *Now that's original. I could have predicted something like that.* "See story page A5." She passed the paper over, settling back on the bed next to Jae, who passed it back.

"I can't. Read it for me? Please."

She nodded, her voice unconsciously taking on a fuller quality, the timbre approximating a professional anchor. "I learned last night that there are two kinds of mush-filled movies, and that I like mush—served correctly. There is the kind which dishes up shameless sentimentality that masquerades as epic romance—the story and the director beating the hapless audience over the head with the message 'Love Conquers All'—a la 'Sleepless In Seattle.' Then there are the movies that show us.

Adapted from the novel of the same name by local writer Holly Wulfenden, *Tropical Storm* is a shining example of the latter. Acclaimed independent film director Jae Cavanaugh brings the same understated elegance to this film that garnered her Sundance's top prize last year, wringing subtle and powerful performances from her leads." She scanned the rest, glossing over comments about her own performance, grinning as she read the final line. "Oh yeah, and I forgot, Dar and Kerry both happen to be women."

Jae just sat, eyes shut, unmoving, looking a little shell shocked.

"You did it."

"We did it." There was a light in the green eyes that almost danced.

Leaning forward she kissed Jae's damp cheeks, suspecting they were tears of joy. They tasted faintly of salt, tinged with something undefinable but that was all Jae. She never quite let her lips touch Jae's, teasing them both.

A sharp knock interrupted the moment.

"Who the hell?"

"Ignore it." Jae moved a fraction, and their lips met hungrily.

The pounding increased. Reed tugged on a white shirt that had been hanging over a chairback and opened the door. "There's a pile of presents out here." She moved a large gift basket into the room, then stepped into the hallway to slide the other packages into the room with her feet, while snagging the champagne and ice bucket with her free hand.

The largest one was passed on to Jae, while she busied herself pulling the cellophane from the basket. Cheese, some fruit—strawberries and grapes mostly, along with an impressive array of chocolates. A little more poking revealed a few other small brightly wrapped packages, one of which bore the distinctive aroma of truffles. *Promising. Definitely promising.*

"I'm going to kill her."

Reed looked up, fumbling with a box. "Who?"

"Caitlynn. She and Thom are sooo dead." A white cardboard box proudly advertised that Jae was now the proud owner of a deluxe toaster oven.

"How sweet. Our first appliance."

"Laugh it up. But knowing Holly's sense of humour, I'd be careful how you open your packages."

Reed shook her head, "Scott-free," showing as she spoke, the chocolate covered strawberries nestled in the box, then blushed as she

read the card. TRY DIPPING THEM. H.

“Scott-free, hunh?” Jae had stood and was running a finger down the side of Reed’s jaw, following the blush downward.

Dragging one of the coated berries across lips nearly the same shade, Reed was acutely conscious of how rapidly her heart had begun to beat. A simple touch, a little proximity, and those beautiful eyes smiling into hers was all it took. “Look on the bright side—we won’t have to leave the room any time soon.”

“Umm. Maybe I ought to promote her again, then.”

That was the last coherent thing either of them said for a long time.

* * *

When she woke again, Jae lazily ran her fingers through Reed’s hair, occasionally holding it up and studying the way the light played on the chestnut strands. It had taken some getting used to; she’d grown accustomed to seeing Reed with almost inky black hair. Smiling, she decided she liked it. The subtle play of red and brown was fascinating, almost as fascinating as the woman herself.

That wasn’t the only thing that was going to take some getting used to.

Reed was lying, half on her, half on the bed, the taller woman a surprisingly good fit against her chest. The height difference kept the less fleshy parts of their anatomy from bruising each other and allowed them to fit snugly together. It was one more thing she found she liked. A lot.

More than a lot.

It had been a night and a morning of discovery—for both of them, and Jae wasn’t sure who had learned more.

She changed the pattern her fingers had been making, moving to trace the faint spread of scars that splayed out from around Reed’s abdomen. They were beautiful, each one part of the woman she held.

“Mmm. Good morning again.” Reed’s voice was husky with sleep.

“Good morning.” She stilled the motion of her fingers.

“Don’t stop.” The plea was accompanied by a kiss.

“Never.” Encouraged, Jae played over a larger area, still fascinated by the faint white lines. Studying the slight dips and pale skin, she realized they were stretch marks, left behind when Rio was born. She let her hand rest on the slightly rounded flesh, the extra weight Reed had gained making her look in life as healthy as she did on film.

She shivered as her own skin was languidly explored. No more words were spoken; none were needed. A mole peeking past the edge of the cotton covering Reed's right shoulder caught her attention, and she moved her mouth to kiss it.

Scars, moles, the edges of muscles, skin, flats of bones, wisps of hair ... each sensitive spot burned itself into her memory, even as they all ran together, subsumed by the growing urgency to their explorations.

Taste joined touch, melded by soft whimpers and exhalations into a completely new sense.

EPILOGUE

Rio ran into the kitchen, nearly tripping over Jae, who emitted a startled squawk as she leaped away from his mother.

Grownups.

They were worse than Uncle Geoff and Aunt Heidi.

What'd they think he was? A baby? He knew what kissing was. Oh well, if it would make them feel better he'd pretend he hadn't seen anything.

Besides if they really wanted to keep stuff a secret, they should probably shut the windows.

He grabbed a cookie from the jar and thundered back outside, he had a couple of more scenes he wanted to shoot. "Bye, mum."

Transplanted from the East Coast, Ciarán finally found a West Coast niche in THE PINK DISHRACK, a fairy tale cottage moored in Victoria Harbour, a short row from a pub, Starbucks and a tattoo parlour. Writing on the water, while a romantic sounding theory, presents its own unique hazards—manuscripts and PCs don't float—with luck, the iMac will. Ciarán's stories are filled with the mythology of her youth and reflect her love of history and sociology. Her daughter, Emma adds, "Ciarán is a good kid."

Coming September 1, 2001 from *Silver Dragon Books*

When the Wave Breaks

By Ciarán Llachlan Leavitt

“Beauty, death and dreams, are the substance of myth.

Even Gods fall in love.

Like mortals, they sometimes love not wisely, but too well.

As sometimes happens with love, there is jealousy and pain.

And like us, they mistake possession for love.”

WHEN THE WAVE BREAKS is a historical drama which explores the humanity of the Gods and tells of the flight of the Tuatha De Danaan from doomed Atland to what will one day become modern Ireland.

Brighid, Danaan Goddess of the Forge and Poets, makes a fateful choice to spurn her betrothed. Her entire nation, as well as their new found allies, must pay the price—in blood.

Her new lover must not only find a way to save Brighid from a vengeful Bres, but must also win the right to stand as Consort to the Beltaine Queen, or the Danaans will lose more than a Queen—for if Artemis fails, they will lose their very existence.

Available soon from Renaissance Alliance

And Those Who Trespass Against Us

By H. M. Macpherson

Sister Katherine Flynn is an Irish nun sent by her order to work in the Australian Outback. Katherine is a prideful woman who originally joined her order to escape the shame of being left at the altar. She had found herself getting married only because society dictated it for a young woman her age, and she was not exactly heartbroken when it didn't take place. Yet, her mother could not be consoled and talked of nothing except the disgrace that she had brought to the Flynn name. So, she finds great relief in escaping the cold Victorian Ireland of 1872.

Catriona Pelham is a member of the reasonably affluent farming gentry within the district. Her relationship with the hardworking townspeople and its farmers is one of genuine and mutual respect. The town's wealthy, however, have ostracized her due to her unorthodox ways and refusal to conform to society's expectations of a woman of the 1870's.

As a bond between Katherine and Catriona develops, Catriona finds herself wanting more than friendship from the Irishwoman. However, she fears pursuing her feelings lest they not be reciprocated. And so the journey begins for these two strong-willed women. For Katherine it is a journey of self-discovery and of what life holds outside the cloistered walls of the convent. For Catriona it is bittersweet, as feelings she has kept hidden for years resurface in her growing interest in Katherine.

Coming Home

By Lois Hart

A triangle with a twist, *Coming Home* is the story of three good people caught up in an impossible situation. Rob, a charismatic ex-fighter pilot severely disabled with MS, has been steadfastly cared for by his wife, Jan, for many years. Quite by accident one day, Terry, a young writer/postal carrier enters their life and turns it upside down. Injecting joy and turbulence into their quiet existence, Terry draws Rob and Jan into her lively circle of family and friends until the growing attachment between the two women begins to strain the bonds of love and loyalty, to Rob and each other.

Vendetta

By Talaran

Nicole Stone is a narcotics detective with a painful past that still haunts her. Extremely attractive, yet reclusive, she has closed her heart to love and concentrates solely on her career. After someone tries to kill her partner in cold blood, she meets her partner's sister, Carly Jamison. An unmistakable attraction catches both of these women off guard. Can Nic protect her partner and Carly from the clutches of a ruthless drug lord bent on revenge

and still open her heart to the one woman who could change her life forever?

Other titles to look for in the coming months from Renaissance Alliance

You Must Remember This By Mary A. Draganis

Staying In the Game By Nann Dunne

Blue Holes To Terror By Trish Kocialski

Restitution By Susanne Beck

Full Circle By Mary A. Draganis

Bleeding Hearts By Josh Aterovis

Anne Azel's Murder Mysteries #1 By Anne Azel

Gun Shy By Lori Lake

High Intensity By Belle Reilly

New Beginnings By Mary A. Draganis

Transcriber's Notes

The original spelling was mostly preserved. A few obvious typographical errors were silently corrected. All other changes are shown here (before/after):

- ... "Assistant Director," Jae said, sotto voice. ...
... "Assistant Director," Jae said, sotto **voce**. ...
- ... script herself. On a computer. Shaking her head in bemusement ...
... script herself. On a computer. Shaking her head in bemusement, ...
- ... was the lynch pin. It had been a demanding role, one that, ...
... was the **linchpin**. It had been a demanding role, one that, ...
- ... They want savvy, business woman—cum—director J.A.E. ...
... They want savvy, business woman-cum-director J.A.E. ...
- ... "You are here just to rape us." Bingo, Perfect. Jae knew ...
... "You are here just to rape us." Bingo. Perfect. Jae knew ...
- ... Tourque. That didn't really count did it? She hadn't finished ...
... **Torque**. That didn't really count did it? She hadn't finished ...
- ... A lean, slightly bowl-legged man in full western apparel ...
... A lean, slightly **bow**-legged man in full western apparel ...
- ... quite unable to believe she actually had ...
... quite unable to believe she actually had. ...
- ... entered her room Things are tough enough without you quoting ...
... entered her room. Things are tough enough without you quoting ...
- ... "And if it wasn't the Guinness, what would it be then, lass?" ...
... "And if it wasn't the **Guinness**, what would it be then, lass?" ...
- ... The actress played along and spoke in a County Claire lilt ...
... The actress played along and spoke in a County Claire lilt. ...
- ... actress responded to Jae's gentle caress and seem to sink back ...
... actress responded to Jae's gentle caress and **seemed** to sink back ...
- ... for Mirabel, a librarian and reviewer, this was a vacation. ...
... for **Maribel**, a librarian and reviewer, this was a vacation. ...
- ... shoulder teasingly. "You and your, 'see they're real.'" ...
... shoulder teasingly. "You and your 'see they're real.'" ...
- ... I ... it's just strange. I mean, its not like I can just log in and find ...
... I ... it's just strange. I mean, **it's** not like I can just log in and find ...
- ... been written just for the actress ...
... been written just for the actress. ...
- ... that's something to shoot for," she quipped ...
... that's something to shoot for," she quipped. ...

- ... script and flipped through it until she found the Crandon beach ...
... script and flipped through it until she found the Crandon **Beach** ...
- ... sounded remarkably like her Grandda piped up, And would Reed ...
... sounded remarkably like her Grandda piped up. And would Reed ...
- ... A bit? Try a whole gigs worth. Just exactly whom was she going ...
... A bit? Try a whole gig's worth. Just exactly whom was she going ...
- ... crossed to the sandy expanse of Crandon beach. ...
... crossed to the sandy expanse of Crandon **Beach**. ...
- ... What if we re-shot the end of the Crandon beach scene? ...
... What if we re-shot the end of the Crandon **Beach** scene? ...
- ... "Ummm. Thanks." Jae took a sip then continued. "They're ...
... "Ummm. Thanks." Jae took a sip, then continued, "They're ...
- ... sounded different than the fight the whole studio had overhead ...
... sounded different than the fight the whole studio had **overheard** ...
- ... "Bitches sell more papers." Laughter echoed after the ...
... "Bitches sell more papers." **Laughter** echoed after the ...
- ... to Chambers rant about Jae's absence. "You know how ...
... to Chambers' rant about Jae's absence. "You know how ...
- ... second unit director was supervising a run though of the hospital ...
... second unit director was supervising a run **through** of the hospital ...
- ... Like the need be held. She'd spent so long holding Rio and ...
... Like the need **to** be held. She'd spent so long holding Rio and ...
- ... "And Cait, she doesn't hate her job" ...
... "And Cait, she doesn't hate her job." ...
- ... "What are you up to now?" Cait asked ...
... "What are you up to now?" Cait asked. ...
- ... factor. That really was the lynchpin of the movie. She wasn't ...
... factor. That really was the **linchpin** of the movie. She wasn't ...
- ... leg that showed beneath the casual skirt, then back up again, ...
... **legs** that showed beneath the casual skirt, then back up again, ...
- ... there, nuh-unh, Chicken, m'grrl? Bawk, Bawk. ...
... there, **unh**-unh, Chicken, m'grrl? Bawk, Bawk. ...
- ... Instead she poured a generous amount of Ol' Grandad into a ...
... Instead she poured a generous amount of Ol' **Granddad** into a ...
- ... and sat down on an spare apple box. ...
... and sat down on **a** spare apple box. ...
- ... a problem" ...
... a problem." ...
- ... "Turn around," Jae instructed a nervous quaver resonating ...
... "Turn around," Jae instructed, a nervous quaver resonating ...
- ... dumfounded and bemused. ...
... **dumbfounded** and bemused. ...

- ... neck and she could feel the smaller woman's heartbeat against ...
... neck and she could **feel** the smaller woman's heartbeat against ...
- ... Torqued years ago, and why—if the sick feeling in the pit of her ...
... **Torque** years ago, and why—if the sick feeling in the pit of her ...
- ... 358 departing to Le Guardia, Boston, terminating in Bangor. ...
... 358 departing to **La** Guardia, Boston, terminating in Bangor. ...
- ... Bangor from LAX ...
... Bangor from LAX. ...
- ... "And it went la, la, la, la, , la, la, , la, , la, la, la, la, ...
... "And it went la, la, la, la, la, la, **.....**, la, la, la, la, la, ...
- ... "You're not even listening to me are you?" ...
... "You're not even listening to me, **are** you?" ...
- ... years older and I still don't know," ...
... years older and I still don't know." ...
- ... "Thanks, Granda. Thank you, Nan." The packet had ...
... "Thanks, **Grandda**. Thank you, Nan." The packet had ...
- ... "Signourney Weaver ever ask for your phone number?" ...
... "**Sigourney** Weaver ever ask for your phone number?" ...
- ... about break over all of them. ...
... about **to** break over all of them. ...
- ... scared you go completely still or drift off into outer space." ...
... scared, you go completely still or drift off into outer space." ...
- ... space between her and her accuser. "Stop." Guttural and harsh, ...
... space between her and her accuser. "Stop." **Guttural** and harsh, ...
- ... And then her eyes were open. There was a tick at the corner ...
... And then her eyes were open. There was a **tic** at the corner ...
- ... close to deciding that if she were going to hang it might as well ...
... close to deciding that if she were going to hang, it might as well ...
- ... "Did you beat up on Rebecca Deveraux too? That's quite a ...
... "Did you beat up on Rebecca **Devereaux** too? That's quite a ...
- ... In a perfect blend, alarm was mixed with curiosity ...
... In a perfect blend, alarm was mixed with curiosity. ...
- ... that only Nostradamus could have interpreted. It was quiet ...
... that only **Nostradamus** could have interpreted. It was quiet ...
- ... building. It was about the right time ...
... building. It was about the right time. ...
- ... turn of phrase eluded her. Believe. Her granda's voice echoed ...
... turn of phrase eluded her. Believe. Her **grandda**'s voice echoed ...
- ... world beyond ...
... world beyond. ...